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SINISTER ISLAND

BY

S. ANDREW WOOD

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no relation to any living
person

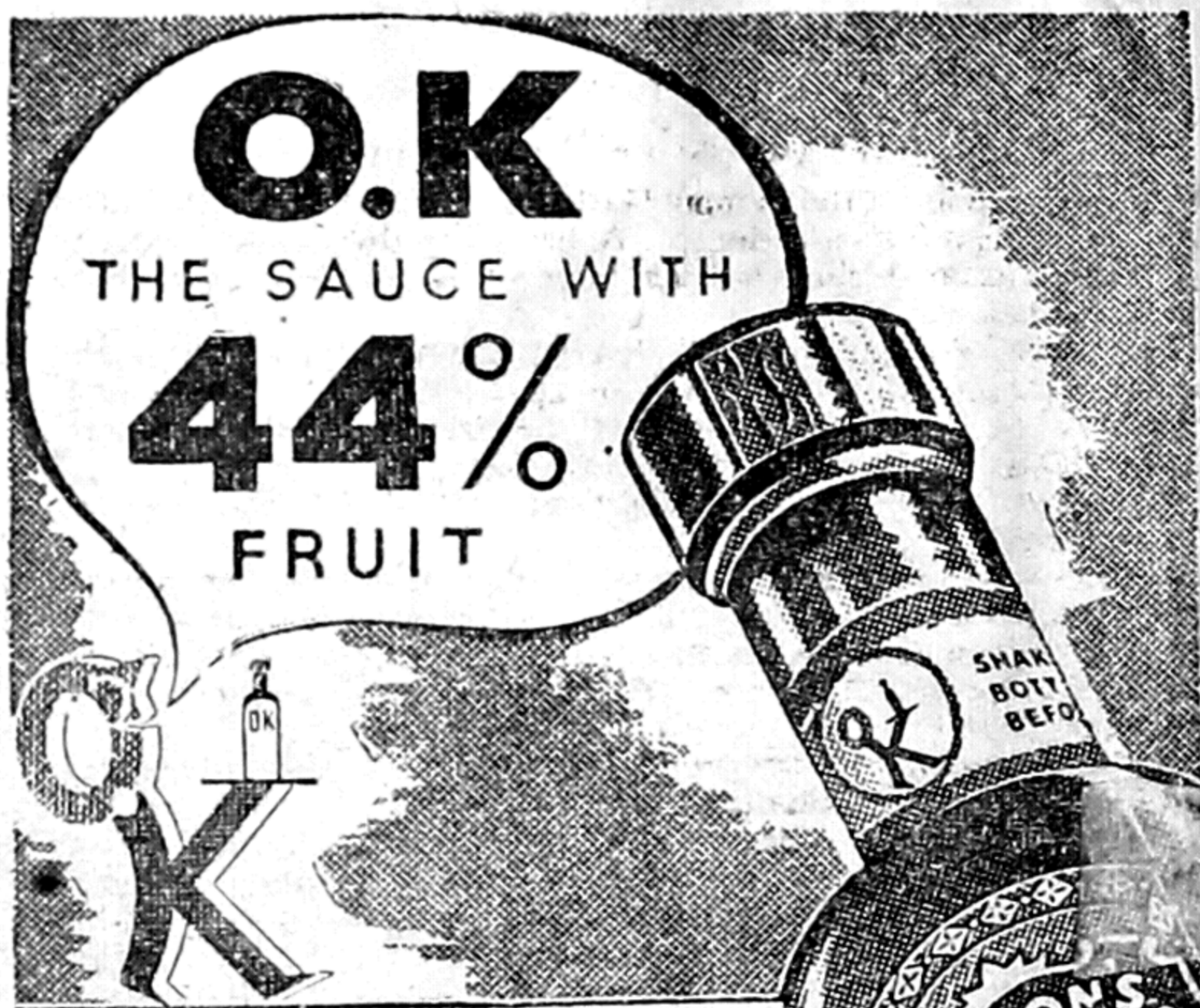


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THE SAUCE THAT DOES YOU GOOD

CHAPTER ONE

PRIVATE AND SUFFICIENT REASON

THE waiting-room of the famous Harley Street doctor was like most such rooms, dignified and dingy. A bar of sunlight came through the heavily-curtained window and fell upon Amabel Gray, as the manservant ushered her in.

She was middle-aged, but still slender and straight, with the slim hands of a young girl, and the vital colour of youth in her hair. Only behind her eyes lay the bitterness of the years, and some mystery which nobody who knew her had ever solved.

There were newspapers and magazines on the table and she took up a newspaper.

In spite of herself, the print swam. The armour of her courage slipped a little in that waiting silence. Coward! She gave a low laugh and bit her underlip to steady it. She knew her fate already without the doctor telling her. What she wanted to know was—how long?

“Secretaries and Companions.” . . . She and Clare had looked often, of late, at that column . . .

A gentleman lately returned from the East and now living in the country, requires a private secretary to assist him in important work. The young lady must be cultured, and of attractive personality, of the Scandinavian type, but with dark brown eyes. This for a private and sufficient reason which will be explained to the successful applicant. Age about twenty-two. Previous experience not essential. Apply by letter, with photograph, to : Mr. Henry Marlowe, Bittern Grange, Great St. Mary, Essex.

She read it languidly and then sat very still, staring at the white paper. The name jumped out like a fire sign from what had been, a moment before, a harmless newspaper.

Mr. Henry Marlowe!

“Will you come, madam, please?”

Ten minutes. Mrs. Gray picked up the gloves she had lain down. The famous man had been very gentle, very quick. She smiled ever so faintly; sweetly, too, as though she felt for a man who had to give death sentences now and then.

“I don’t want you to comfort me, please. And I don’t want to go into any hospital or nursing home. All I want you to tell me is how long I have if I take fairly good care of myself.”

“It’s not possible to tell exactly. One must never give up hope altogether. Six months perhaps. Perhaps a little more. The will is an important factor in these matters, Mrs. Gray.”

“I have plenty of that,” said Amabel Gray.

* * * * *

The sun was beating down upon the long street in Battersea, burning up the little villa gardens, turning the pavement to griddle-stones. Mrs. Badger, the landlady, was washing the last of her pans in the kitchen, and Amabel was able to dart up the stairs to her sitting-room before that clapper-tongued lady had time to wipe her hands and emerge.

"Mumsie! Where on earth have you been?"

Mrs. Gray laughed.

"I went to see that doctor, at long last. I felt a fool, Clare. It was that sour Scotch doctor I told you about, and he hooted at me. Shooed me out with his sporran. There's nothing the matter with me. I'm a hypochondriac, he thinks."

"The beast!" Clare spoke with her warm cheek against her mother's. "But a nice beast to find nothing wrong with you. Didn't he say you needed a change to the country, even?"

"Not at all. He knows better than to indulge me like that. Stand up, Clare, dear. Let me look at you."

Clare's eyes glinted rebelliously. A little trick she had of pressing her lips softly together manifested itself.

"You've no right in this Badger's den. You've been let down both by your daughter and your husband, mumsie, and that's all there is to it. All those years—you did a lot for me, mother, dear. I lie awake at nights sometimes and think of mother-all-alone. And me. We've been twenty years without my father, haven't we?"

"He died, Clare," said Amabel Gray, holding between her fingers the newspaper she had brought unopened into the house.

"I know. But it was a sort of treachery to you. Poor father! When people die it sometimes does seem a kind of treachery. I think. They must leave so many people in the lurch. I'm so glad to know you're quite all right, darling."

"Only a little tired. I'll lie down for a bit. It's cooler in the bedroom."

Amabel Gray, when she was alone, opened the newspaper and again read the advertisement that had jumped out at her in the Harley Street waiting-room, like a blow from Destiny. Twenty years!

"Why does he want a girl like Clare? Just like Clare?"

She tried to ask herself the question calmly. But memories and ghosts made her shudder. They would not be drawn back. Was she still frightened of Henry Marlowe, her husband?

"Not now!" murmured Amabel. Why should she be when, for twenty years, Henry Marlowe had thought his wife and child were dead?

They had gone down with one of the boats at the time of the disaster to the Dutch liner, *Jan van Noord*. In mid-Channel the big East Indiaman, homeward bound from Sumatra, had been rammed broadside in the September fog by a reckless tramper. There had been panic. . . . Yet for Amabel Marlowe that wild scramble for the boats had been a way out of a nightmare. The East had put a devil into Henry Marlowe, and changed him within a brief six months. Out in Java where Marlowe had trading interests, Clare had been born. How she remembered that long, lonely night and that nightmare bungalow, and how, in her delirium, she had called in vain for her husband! Amabel knew later that he had been at Lucia da Costa's bungalow, but it was only when the sinuous young Filipino widow appeared aboard the homeward-bound boat that she understood, and the slow flame of hatred and disgust began to burn inside her.

When the women's life-boat had overturned, Amabel Marlowe for the moment had wished to drown with her child. But a fierce hunger

for life succeeded and, after an eternity of struggle, some Greater Power had sent her ashore, had shown her the deserted beach but in a sandy cove, where she had found dry clothes, had brought her and baby Clare to London, even as their names appeared in the long casualty lists of the *Jan van Noord* disaster. And the long years had crawled, full of struggle and sacrifice and passionate love, under a new name in a new world.

Six months. Perhaps a little longer. After that Clare would be alone. Yet . . . what if Henry Marlowe should engage as his private secretary the daughter whom he thought was long ago drowned? It was fantastic. But—her breath came sharply. Henry Marlowe must be rich. He was past middle-age. There would be a kind of bitter justice about it all, if he grew fond of his own daughter in the evening of his years and the bond of blood acted unconsciously. Justice, and something more for Clare.

The door opened gently. It was Clare.

"Good gracious, what's the excitement now?"

"I was just looking at an advertisement in the newspaper. Read it, my dear. It sounds to me rather intriguing."

Clare took the newspaper.

"What a strange creature the man must be!" She lifted a wondering and rather startled face. "We're the Scandinavian type, aren't we, mother? Also, we have those dark brown eyes he seems to insist on. It might have been specially put in for me."

Isabel Gray nodded.

"It might. If the man knew there was such a person as you in the world. Which I'm sure he doesn't. I think it's safe, Clare."

"Safe?" Clare pulled a mouth. "I'm sure it is. As houses. 'Henry Marlowe.' It's rather a nice name. It sounds like a hard-jawed but very sentimental man who has loved only one woman in his life, and lost her long ago. Lately returned from the East! He may die of liver and leave all his money to his secretary. Yes, I'll apply, mumsie."

CHAPTER TWO

SHARKS ARE ALWAYS GENTLEMEN

HENRY MARLOWE cracked a walnut carefully between a mahogany brown finger and thumb, and rolled a very fine and velvety Madeira over his tongue. The dining-room at Bittern Grange was small but very tastefully panelled, and the candles which it was Henry Marlowe's fancy to burn for dinner illumination showed up admirably his high cheek-bones and beaked but shapely nose. He was a man turned sixty, with a thatch of white hair and a tight mouth which might have been sensitive or secretive, according to the opinion of the observer. When he spoke his voice was soft yet almost startlingly deep.

"The cigars, Dak."

The Malay servant padded across the room. Henry Marlowe's eyebrows went up as he noticed that the cigar-box shook ever so slightly in the man's hand.

"The gen'lman still wait for you, *tuan*," said Sam Dak. His face was like sun-scorched teak. Only his eyes seemed whiter than they should have been. His master favoured him with a long and amused stare.

"He's very comfortable, I'm sure," murmured Henry Marlowe. Marlowe passed leisurely from the room with his cigar enjoyably alight. Then, without haste, he entered his library. His greeting was pleasant, if ironical.

"Why, Lorenquo! I call this handsome of you. And, assuredly, in this case, handsome is that handsome does. I see Savile Row in the cut of that waistcoat and Burlington Arcade itself in that exquisite tie. Am I correct?"

His visitor had come nervously out of his chair at Marlowe's entrance. For an instant the look on his dark face was that of an alert animal, watching; uncertain whether it is hunter or hunted, and prepared to take either role. It vanished, and Cæsar Lorenquo of the Islands, of the rat-houses and of the sultan's palaces of Malacca, gave a light bow, in which vanity and a kind of maiden modesty mingled.

"You compliment me, Mr. Marlowe. Yes, I have spent money on clothes while I have been in England." He straightened his batik tie, and looked down at a pair of small patent-leather-shod feet foppishly. Half-breed of Spanish father and Arab mother, he had a southern and picturesque taste in everything. "I'm delighted to be received at last. It was hungry work, waiting here. I postponed my meal. I have not dined, yet."

"No? I have."

"You are pleasant but not so hospitable as sometimes." One of Cæsar Lorenquo's nostrils shut, though he still smiled, and stroked his sleek hair under the rebuff. "This is a rich house you have. I could not go back to the East without calling to see it. I have been in London on business, you understand. London, Paris, Berlin, everywhere. I am a Pedlar of Dreams."

"Chandu, or stolen pearls?"

"Both," Lorenquo smiled smoothly, "and other things. Ah, yes, a beautiful mansion. Better than the bungalow at Maratua, where Forsyth—you remember your good partner?—died of snakebite. Better even than the hotel in Batavia, where your friend Gerald Sleath was found in his room with a Dyak knife buried in his back."

"Sleath nearly died. It was a narrow shave."

"Nearly?"

Henry Marlowe bent forward. The other man made a gesture.

"Sleath is tough. He is what you call a superman beneath that charming lazy exterior of his. One could have put a fist in the hole between his shoulder blades. Though it would have been an unpleasant and ungentlemanly thing to do. Luckily the knife was not poisoned. The ruffian who did it neglected that. He was so excited that he forgot the custom of the Islands, I suppose.

"Dear old Sleath is a shark—one of those unpleasant fellows that hang about the bows of a ship for days when there's a sick man in the cabin. Don't you agree, Marlowe? Can't be killed. Always bobs up again. A gentleman, too. Sharks are always gentlemen, don't you think? He'll be Rajah of half the Islands some day—Sleath, I mean. I'll be Grand Vizier and Lord of the Bedchamber, d'y'know, old top."

"Ah!" Lorenquo leapt noiselessly out of his chair. "The worthy Sam Dak. As admirably cat-footed as ever!"

"You clap hands for me, *tuan*?"

"An excellent servant, Caesar, still, you perceive. A little disobedient now and again. Or, perhaps, slow in the uptake. When do you sail for Singapore?"

"To-night. That was why I called. Perhaps I could perform some little commission. Take some message to darling old Sleath, perhaps?"

"Thanks, no. You'll be glad to get east of Suez again."

"It is safer, I think." Lorenquo glanced at the curtain. His pallor was more genuine than his flashing smile. "And it is my home. The sun, the palms, and the blue sea. They call to me. Even the Arab girls, all brown satin—yes, they call. Which reminds me. Have you had any answer to your newspaper advertisement yet?"

Marlowe stared into the sly, grinning mask. He said:

"Mr. Lorenquo wants to go, Sam Dak. Show him out."

The room, with its Oriental note, its carved sandalwood and clumsy native weapons, its faint scent of tamarind, was very quiet after Lorenquo had gone. Henry Marlowe, with his mouth trapped and tight, stood waiting. And presently Sam Dak, the Malay, returned.

"You jungle scum!" said Henry Marlowe softly, and with no passion. "So you prefer death? I promised you that if ever you disobeyed. Why didn't you strike from behind that curtain? Look at me and answer."

Sam Dak lifted his flat, brown face, a man enslaved. Devoured by terror of those changing green eyes. But powerless.

"Sleath! You lie to me. You say he dead. Sleath!"

The letter had come a week ago. Henry Marlowe took it once again from the drawer.

Seiqueira Kalu, Celebes.

My dear Henry Marlowe,

This letter will surprise you, I expect. We parted not the best of friends. But that was twenty years and more ago. The old David Trenchard you knew is now a sundowner, breaking-up, but still headstrong. They call me the little White Rajah now. I am rich in lands and money, Marlowe, a sort of half-trader, half-king. This island is mine, and half a dozen smaller ones about it. The Dutchmen leave it to me. I fly their flag once a year. But I am Rajah David, and my son succeeds me when I die.

Bear with me patiently. I am an old man with dreams. I loved Amabel in the dead days. You won, but I continued to love her. When you brought her out to the Islands twenty years ago I went mad because I imagined she was not happy. We quarrelled, you and I. But that is all past. . . .

What is her child like? Perhaps Amabel is dead. But something tells me her daughter still lives, with Amabel's bright hair and eyes, and Amabel's bright soul. Listen, Marlowe. Bring her out here. Seiqueira Kalu would be better for a good white woman. I have a son; a fine, clean boy, and he hardly knows what it is to speak to a woman of his own race. They would be great friends, and perhaps—well, I'll say no more about what might happen just now. I would give Amabel's child her heart's desire. You must bring her out. I pray you to. . . . An old man writing. But he is Rajah David. . . . If you agree with my proposal, you will know the weight of my gratitude. . . .

"God!" whispered Henry Marlowe, softly drumming his fist upon the desk.

He began to pace the room like a caged animal, after the violence of the single word. When rich fools were sentimental, poor wise men thanked their stars. And he was poor. England could not hold him much longer. . . . Out in that tropic world's end, the drowning of Amabel and her child had never reached Trenchard. Probably he had been on some remote expedition when the *Jan van Noord* went down and it was a half-forgotten tale when he got back to Kalu. But somewhere in England there must surely be a girl of twenty-two with fair hair and brown eyes, like Amabel's had been.

In his desk were a score of letters, a score of photographs. They were all useless. He opened the drawer, took them out and threw them down again disgustedly. Gold-diggers and simpering barmaids all of them.

There was just one letter which had come by the afternoon's post. It contained no smiling photograph, but he liked the writing. The girl said, coolly, that she was coming down to interview him that evening, and it was almost time. Marlowe was conscious of a touch of excitement beneath his usual steely calm.

For a moment he had forgotten to watch the drive, and the dog by his side growled slightly.

"Mr. Marlowe!"

It was a girl, flushed with hurrying, but very sedate under her little velvet hat. She came across the grass shyly, yet with determination in her gait, and stopped by him.

"I guessed you were Mr. Marlowe," said Clare, her cheeks burning a little. "I think you got my letter in answer to your advertisement for a—a secretary."

"I did, young lady," said Henry Marlowe. Through him went a deep excitement that was almost awe. He found his voice husky. "And you have followed it. I take it very kind of you. Is your name by any means—Amabel—or Marlowe?"

"I'm sorry. Forgive me if it sounded strange." He looked into the girl's puzzled eyes. She was shaking her head. "But you are so much alike. You and that sentimental reason I mentioned in my advertisement. It's quite simple. She was my daughter, and she died. Perhaps you understand."

"Yes. I thought it might be something like that. Perhaps I ought not to have come without sending you my photograph first. But photographs are not much use, I always think. And I usually do things on impulse. My name is Clare Gray, and I live in London with my mother. I told you that in my letter. Perhaps—perhaps I'm too much like your daughter. But I'm a good secretary," she ended gravely.

"I'm sure you are. Shall we go into my library and talk a little?"

CHAPTER THREE

FREEBOOTER

CLARE had been nearly a month private secretary to Mr. Henry Marlowe, the Oriental traveller, of Bittern Grange, Essex.

At first, she had felt a sense of something sinister about the old

house. The hard-bitten sea marsh outside and the sensual and mysterious East inside contrasted. Sam Dak, the Malay servant, gave her a faint distaste, to start with. Even Henry Marlowe, till she knew him, had repelled as well as attracted her. But that was past now. The Malay served her like an Arabian genie, and, in addition, she had a girl from the distant village to wait on her. Mumsie had gone down to a tiny cottage on the Romney Marshes and was getting as strong as a horse. So she said in her letters. . . . It was Henry Marlowe who had sent her there; one of his many kindnesses.

"You're too good to me," Clare said, with troubled eyes, "and I don't give you value for it, I'm afraid. There's not enough work for me to do."

"Value! You've brought me out of the slough of despond. I'm jealous of that mother of yours. I'm glad she keeps out of my way. I want to steal you from her sometimes, child, when I think of little Amabel. Some day, perhaps——"

He turned away with his quick, wistful smile. All his life he had been a good actor, and, at sixty, the gift still remained. Not that it was all acting. He liked the girl as much, probably, as he would ever have liked his own daughter. If she was docile and fell in with his plans there would not be a thicker pair of thieves in Christendom when they got to the Islands. . . . But he must go delicately and not startle her.

One day a cable came from far Seiqueira Kalu. Sam Dak put it into his hands one morning.

Bring Clare, quickly.—Trenchard.

"Impatient old Rajah!" murmured Henry Marlowe, with thin, smiling lips.

He lay wakeful that night. It was hot and steamy. On many such nights, in a more tropic country, Henry Marlowe had lain awake, with the cool butt of his revolver next to his skin, listening to the boom of surf and the jungle sounds, watching the open window. That night in Macassar, when Sleath, who at times had a weakness for native weapons, had hunted him with Abou Abdulla's scimitar. Sleath who still lived. . . .

A board creaked on the landing outside his door. Marlowe sat up. Again the creak. On the staircase this time.

Sam Dak himself could not move more silently than he, when he wished. The moon was young and scarcely gave light. The double staircase of Bittern Grange was soaked up in darkness, save for one glimmering window. In the big hall below the Dutch clock ticked solemnly, unseen. But it was not downstairs that Henry Marlowe peered. It was at the door of the tower-stairs, which was slightly ajar.

Noiselessly, Henry Marlowe crept up the narrow stairs of the tower. Up there he kept his trophies: native weapons and shark-skin shields, parangs, scimitars and the miscellaneous loot of Southern seas. Somebody was up there. . . .

Henry Marlowe stopped inside the tower chamber with a low laugh and clicked down the electric light switch.

There was no answering flood of light. Darkness remained. But, instead, there came a little "phut!" and the tap of something that clicked against the stone wall behind him and struck a little spark. The feathers of a poisoned fish-tooth dart brushed by Henry

Marlowe's ear. A little frozen chill shot through the marrow of his bones, and then passed.

"Sleath!" he whispered softly. "Is that you, you hunter? Come out and let me see you."

There was no answer. His hand plucked a *sundang*, the short Malay broad-knife, which hung upon the wall, and lobbed it sideways at something moving by the window. It skimmed phosphorescently as the blade caught the moonlight, but missed. Like a bolt, he was across to the wriggling shape that had dropped on all fours there. With no sound, they went down together upon the floor, Marlowe uppermost, his fingers upon the man's throat, knee bored deep into the soft body. The electric torch he had snatched up but kept masked until then, sprayed a clear white beam, as though it had been a stabbing sword. A whimper of despair came from the man in his grasp.

It was Sam Dak, the Malay. A vein throbbed at Henry Marlowe's temple at the sight of him. There was a long silence, and then icy death was born slowly in the white man's voice.

"So you would kill me?"

"Hai-ya. I would kill you, *tuan*. I promise Lorenquo. I come up here and make a sound so you would follow. I take out the lamps for you not to see me."

"And why?"

"*Tuan* Sleath. He my master while he lives. Not you."

"So? We part, now, Sam Dak."

"Yes, *tuan*."

Marlowe picked up the poisoned dart which lay on the floor and handed it to Sam Dak.

"Just below the wrist, Sam Dak," he said. "One prick. Do you hear, you dog?"

Sam Dak shut his eyes from the flaring glance. He wheeled blindly, and ran. There was one moment when the window of the tower chamber was a shattered oval of flying glass, with Sam Dak in the middle of it and the small moon swimming in the sky behind him. The next, it was a gaping hole, a-shimmer with the clear sky.

Deliberately his finger switched on all the lights. Downstairs the servants, awakened by that crash, were moving. A man's tousled head came to the bottom of the stairs. Marlowe spoke to him:

"Go back. It was my servant, Sam Dak. He ran amok, smashed the window and climbed down the ivy. If he comes back, kick the fool from the doorstep. You hear? Tell the others to return to bed."

He heard the man mutter, "Good riddance!" and turned. Clare's door had opened and her scared face looked forth.

"What has happened?"

"It was Sam Dak. He's absconded, the rascal. He would choose the noisiest way in the middle of the night. My dear, I'm so sorry."

"I wasn't asleep. Some way, I felt excited and sleepless. Did he—hurt you?" Clare put the question sharply.

"He nearly killed me with a poisoned dart, the blackguard. I'm all right. All right, Clare, my dear."

Clare closed the door of her room. The birds in the garden had started singing and a lemon-coloured glow was showing through the trees.

Slowly she dressed and went out into the dew-drenched sunrise.

"Clare!"

It was Henry Marlowe. He came, white-haired, but very vital, through the low mist that curdled over the ground.

"I watched you from the window. I must speak, my dear. Some day a young man will say something like that to you, perhaps, Clare. Do you understand? I want to be able to give you to him, if he is worthy of you. I want that right. Listen. I wish to adopt you as my daughter. I have wanted to for a long time. Since I first saw you."

His voice was almost harsh. His thin brown hands took Clare's.

"Don't answer yet. I'm going back to the East soon, and you're coming with me—God willing. I'm a lonely man and have nobody to love and leave my money to. Your mother is poor. Forgive me if I say that. But if you come out East with me we shall leave her very comfortable, even very happy, I believe."

"Your daughter!" Clare spoke wonderingly. An odd, warm mist clouded her sight.

"Clare Marlowe," answered Henry Marlowe gently. "I make no condition, heaven knows. A lonely man who has set his heart on a thing doesn't wish to. I should only humbly ask you to take my name. Think it over, child. Think it over all day, then tell me."

CHAPTER FOUR

SLEATH SQUASHED A CENTIPEDE

THE thunder had rolled away and the sea below the rattan bungalow on Seiqueira Kalu, to which Gerald Sleath had lately come, was silky blue. The heavy swell rolled like liquid glass to shatter, with a sleepy sound in its breaking, on the beach. There were a few *praus* scattered on the horizon and the topsail of a trading schooner sinking below the rim, but otherwise the sea was empty as far as man could see.

Sleath squashed a small centipede which scuttled across the floor of the verandah.

"Just like that, eh, Cæsar?" he asked, with a quizzical gleam of his fine teeth. "Only a few throats to be cut, and, hey, presto, we're the uncrowned King of Kalu and his High Chamberlain. You've got the brain of a goat, Cæsar."

Cæsar Lorenquo, three days back in the Islands, wriggled.

"I don't think the old bloke-wallah will last long," he protested.

"Meaning Rajah David? He's not a nigger-boy, unlike some people I could mention. Yet somehow"—Sleath looked thoughtful and sleepy—"somehow, I don't believe he *will* last long. One has intuitions."

His long and sinewy body came out of the cane chair. A grimace passed across him.

"This cursed back of mine is still stiff when there's thunder about. I'd have taken it kind of you if you'd got Marlowe for me, like a good fellow"—the lazy mask slipped, and what was behind it showed an instant. It made Cæsar Lorenquo glance down at his manicured hands, though he was neither tender-hearted nor fastidious.

"I tried, you know. But England isn't the Islands, by a long way. And he had Sam Dak hidden behind the curtain. It was a

pretty curtain, but thin, and Sam Dak is very accurate. I tell you I was glad to get out of that house."

"Ah, Sam Dak!" The man at the verandah rail spoke musingly. "If Sam Dak by any miracle came back here, we should be complete. He's my ju-ju. Did Marlowe show any sign of flogging him to death or anything like that? If he did, Sam Dak's black soul would come back to me, for work to do."

The wind was tossing the palms behind the bungalow and sent a dry, hissing sound into the silence. Gerald Sleath raised his head to look down at the sweep of sapphire bay and the island garden, which was Seiqueira Kalu. In the middle of it, white and shining like an English mansion, was the teak and Sula stone house of old David Trenchard. Beyond the surf of the lagoon white sails showed—pearling *praus*—and beyond that, misty islands and mountain tops. All by the seal of the Dutch crown, the kingdom of Rajah David, for the past three decades. . . .

Gerald Sleath touched his lips with his tongue. He had the good fortune—or otherwise—to be David Trenchard's nephew.

"Confounded old moneybags! He had the audacity to promise to shoot up his own nephew if ever he set foot on Kalu again, Cæsar."

"He will be defunct soon, perhaps." Cæsar Lorenquo trimmed his nails.

"There will then be your silly cousin, his son."

"Alan? Ah, yes. A handsome lad."

The wind had fallen and Kalu lay like a painted picture. Somewhere in the jungle, which came down almost to the ramshackle bungalow, a parakeet squalled and a trail of purple bougainvillæa moved slightly by the end of the verandah. To-night the steamer was due.

"We'll move inside. It's cooler there, and I've some brandy."

A pliant figure came running, light as thistledown, along the verandah, to stop motionless in the doorway. A whispered "*Tuan!*" and the flash of a blue jacket in the sunlight, and a Chinese woman was inside. She seemed to have started out of the landscape, but the Englishman evinced no surprise.

"Hullo, Lula Ling! What you want, eh?"

The woman jumped back with the movement of a startled deer at the sight of Lorenquo.

"Me thought—you by yourself. It is nothing. I come for a walk to settle inward digestion." The flat, wrinkled face, with its scraped and pomaded hair, smiled foolishly, and Lula Ling, the Chinese waiting-woman at David Trenchard's house, began to retreat. "Inward digestion all right now. No more hiccups. I 'pologize to your flend, *Tuan Sleath*—"

"This gentleman is a dear friend. Comrade-in-arms. Understand? He call on me about the health of Rajah David."

The woman's liquid eyes slanted at Cæsar Lorenquo, who epicure that he was, surveyed her with some disgust. As she noticed it a little laugh like the titter of a child broke from Lula Ling and she blew smoke across at Lorenquo.

"He say to himself Lula an ugly sow-pig, eh? But not always. *Tuan Sleath* know that. Aie! Not long ago Lula the water lily of Laut. But Chinese girl go pop quickly. She wait at Rajah's table now, and Rajah go very sick."

"S!" murmured Sleath.

"Vice sad." The woman's face was an enigma. Lorenquo had rived his chair back and was staring at her. She seemed to enj his attention. "Each day Rajah David grow worse. Malady increa in strength. Not go to bed, though. He wait for something But soon he die. Sure."

Cæsar Lorenquo, who was not squeamish, backed a little further. He wched Sleath pour out brandy and shake his head as Lula Ling put of her hand for the glass. Sleath raised it to his own lips and emptd it very coolly.

"Tetotal Chinese women best, Lula Ling. You go back home now. Rajah David want his supper."

"Bison?" said Lorenquo, drawing a breath.

"Sme drug. God knows what." Sleath's hand trembled a little but his teeth flashed. He brought his foot down on another centide. "Two!"

"hat was the cheery nephew, dear old Alan," said Cæsar Lorequo, gravely looking down at the floor. "Though it was rath: intelligent anticipation, was it not? And after that, the delus. I mean tersay how will you guide the jolly fortune of the defect monarch of all he surveys in our direction? You are of his bod, true. But Alan does not love you and may make a will in which his memory slips up on you. Where do we come in?"

"I'll take you back to the harbour, my dear Lorenquo," he said.

From the bugalow, through deep, blossomy undergrowth, a narrow path went down to where the Indian Ocean, its gigantic march arrested by the coral-reef, thundered gently. A small motor launch, teak-built and old, but sound enough, lay moored there in the tiny haven; such a boat as could be picked up in the Islands quite cheaply after some Dutch trader had wreaked his worst upon its engine.

Gerald Sleath sat at the wheel as it purred out into the bay. He was in wholly good humour again, and Cæsar Lorenquo basked gratefully in his returned charm.

The towering mass of a steamer blotted out half the sky, and Sleath opened the throttle to draw ahead. As he did so, there came a soft splash in the amethyst water and the luminous trail of a strong swimmer came moving steadily towards the boat.

"Man overboard!" whispered Cæsar Lorenquo. "Stop the engine, Sleath. We are humanitarians, after all."

He was gazing fascinatedly over the side. A dark and dripping head emerged and a pair of glistening arms raised their owner on to the counter of the launch. In torn dungarees, with a face that was lean, starved and wolfish, like a faithful dog that had limped across half the world to the master who owned it body and soul, the man who had leaped through the tower window of Bittern Grange, climbed over the counter and stepped, dripping, into the boat.

"Me come back to you, *tuan* Sleath," said Sam Dak.

CHAPTER FIVE

TEN PEACOCKS

IN all the Islands, from Sourabaya to the Philippines and beyond, his reckless courage, violent temper and childlike trust in his fellow-

men had made old David Trenchard almost a legend. From a country of dirty and blood-thirsty little native sultans, ciqueira Kalu had changed to a rich little Eden under the chestnut-bearded English giant. As seaman, trader and patriarch, "Rajah David" had amassed power and fortune, which, in spite of the heavy tribute levied by the Dutchman, grew steadily, till nowadays he was almost a figure of legend.

"All yours, Alan," said David Trenchard to his son more than once of late. "My work's done. Be good to Seiqueira Klu, my boy, and it'll be good to you."

He sat alone in his deep chair, on the stoep of his big white house, the punkah-boy behind him. Not for one moment, since the smoke of the approaching steamer had blackened the horizon, had his sunken and eager eyes left it. Rajah David's wife had died of fever eighteen years before. He had not suffered much at the time. There was another woman. In London four years before he married, when he had moved about its grey streets a tanned and bearded son of Anak, whom people turned round to look at, he had loved Mabel Crawford, and her image remained. Marlowe had won her. But neither Henry Marlowe nor another woman could efface that cool and fair image. The years had only stamped it deeper. It was dark now and the steamer lay at the quay. Alan had gone down with the gharry to meet Henry Marlowe and his daughter. Rajah David himself was too weak. He knew himself to be dying, yet lay in the soft gloom.

The crunch of wheels, and then three figures on the verandah steps. Alan's laugh came, deep and boyish. Broad-shouldered and clean of limb, the boy loomed by the side of a slender, rather pale girl. Rajah David's eyes burned.

"So you're Clare!" he said, on a deep breath. "They made you in your mother's image. Come here, my dear. You're not frightened of an old tinpot Rajah?"

"Miss Marlowe's a bit tired," Alan Trenchard put in quickly. "It's a beastly passage through the Straits when you're not used to it."

Clare smiled gratefully at the young man, and their eyes, each lit with the warmth of youth, met each other's.

"A bit," she admitted. "I'm not acclimatized yet, either. The Islands are rather like a dream at first, you know, and I'm not used to Rajahs and their sons."

The old Rajah put out his hand.

"Well, Henry Marlowe! You've changed in twenty years. I heard a rumour that you were in Java not long ago, but you never came across to Kalu. Frightened of old man Trenchard, eh? Man, I'd forgotten we parted brass rags years ago. When I saw from some travel magazine that you'd taken a house in England—well—I wrote you. You know why. I'm glad to see you."

* * * * *

It was half an hour later, when the dinner-gong was throbbing softly through Rajah David's house, that Clare, her lips pressed together, faced Henry Marlowe alone.

"I feel horribly guilty," she said. "Just as though I'd meant deliberately to deceive him all the time: Can't we tell him?"

"And break his heart? He's kept himself alive till he saw you. Poor old Trenchard is a sick man, Clare, one can see that. It won't be for long. It makes him happy. You can see that, too."

"It's not honest."

"No, it's dishonest. But honesty is sometimes a brutal thing, my dear. Henry Marlowe took her hands in his and looked down at the troubled face. When he did that, Clare felt that there was some bond between them which she could not fathom, and whether it frightened her or gave her pleasure she could never tell. "If we were all honest, the world would be even more miserable than it is. Poor old Trenchard! He even sees your resemblance to me."

Marlowe's lips twitched above Clare's bright head. Something in his tone jarred her faintly for an instant and she raised her face sharply. But, again, he spoke in the deep, level voice that always had such power to reassure her.

"You gave me your promise. Will you go back on it?"

"Why did you make me?" She threw up her head again rather pleadingly. "Oh, I know you've been very kind. I want to show my gratitude. But if they found out that I was only your adopted daughter, an—an impostor—horrible word and a horrible thing. . . ."

* * * * *

A moon rode over the low palms and mangroves and lit the surf of the reef to silvery lace, where it boomed softly and then died away in the distance. The binnacle light in the cockpit lit up Alan Trenchard's big chin and the straight lips, with their tiny, strong moustache.

It was Clare who spoke, dreamily:

"I love your islands at night. Sometimes, by daylight, I think there's something dangerous and a bit sinister about them, as though they were too beautiful and fierce to be good. They look as though they could hurt."

"I understand that. I was born on Kalu and I'm the son of Rajah David—a dippy sort of title, though everybody gives him it and he's proud of it—yet I get nervy sometimes. But you'll not find Ten Peacocks sinister. It's my special preserve. The old man handed it over to me to work the pearl and copra there. The Malay name of it is a jaw-breaker. So we call it in English, Ten Peacocks."

Would she take the black pearls that Omar Ali had brought in for him a week before, Alan wondered? His usually steady young pulse beat with an unaccustomed quickness. He had been reluctant to take that trip to Ten Peacocks. Rajah David, his father, was sinking. But the old man had commandingly insisted that he should carry away Clare to see the island. Both he and Henry Marlowe had left Clare and him very much on their own. He was fiercely glad he had come now.

"It's been like a year, this past week or two."

"So long?" Clare laughed and coloured faintly.

"I'm an awkward devil. As though I'd known you a year, I mean. Or several years, for the matter of that. I seem to have known you always."

Clare watched the dawn rush up out of the sky. She, too, felt as though she had known this big, agile young man, with his slow smile and lean limbs, all her life. He seemed to stretch a big, firm band

to her out of all the terrifying beauty of the Islands. Sometimes, Clare thought, she was afraid . . .

Ten Peacocks stood against the sunrise, all blood at gold and milky cloud curtains. Through the reef the launch sh out on a satin flood into a lagoon that held not ten, but a myria peacocks. By a blossom-hidden path they walked to the slim bambu bungalow which Trenchard had had built and what was to Cla a dream breakfast was served by a silent Chinese servant . . . They watched the teak-hued divers and explored the mosque which some long-departed sultan had built out of the blood and sweat of his slaves.

They were both strangely tongue-tied again, as they larded the launch where the water lapped it in the lagoon. The engine, which was usually velvet smooth, stuck for a moment and then fid huskily. But, drawing towards the opening of the coral atoll, it softened down to its steady purr.

The surf was like white thunder about the reef. O y at the opening did the water run glassy and smooth. Trenchard opened out and the craft shot forward. Under the hatch, as the box soused, sounded a faint crash. The propeller shrieked and stopped. The headlong way died down. Slowly the launch slewed, like a sm horse that shied at danger.

It was all over in an instant. Broadside the launch lifted and, with Clare in his arms, Trenchard leapt. The overturning was poised over them. Clare had a moment to gulp air before she was plucked down deep into a blue twilight. Then, again, she was in the smother of surf. She saw Alan Trenchard's fierce face and smiled with a sudden glow of happiness, which utterly transcended the moment of danger.

"I can swim. Don't worry!" she called.

Whether or not he heard, he caught her and a mighty wave sent them swirling back into the lagoon. He was holding her, swimming strongly, holding her so fast that she called out in pain. But the dominant feeling was joy, insane joy at his touch and the dread for her on his bloodless, white face.

"You're not hurt?" They stood, dripping, on the white sand.

"No. And I could swim. I shouted it out to you."

"So could the sharks. They're born to it, you know."

The colour ebbed from her cheeks. Alan Trenchard looked down at the slim, white-breeched figure.

"I love you very much, Clare," he said. "I'm a hobbledehoy of the Islands. But I've loved you ever since I set eyes on you. I've been telling you all morning. Couldn't you hear me?"

"I think I could," whispered Clare. "Though it's very sudden. I think I like it because of that."

The surf boomed on the reef and ground the fragments of the motor-boat against the coral. But they neither saw nor heard.

Presently Clare stirred and sighed.

"It's the Islands. They've got into my blood already. I only saw you a week ago. And you a Rajah's son!"

Trenchard dropped his lips to her hair. His eyes danced.

"And the old Rajah fixed it long since with your father; I more than suspect. Usually people hate each other at first sight under these circumstances. But we didn't."

A chill shot through Clare. Icy revelation seemed to come. She

sat staring at the lagoon. That was why Henry Marlowe had brought her East, then . . . Slowly she looked at Alan Trenchard. It had been very swift, like the dawn she had watched that morning. But it was real. Like the dawn, it would not go back till the long night fell. Already he thought that she might lose him turned her sick. In the middle of vague terror and deceit he was the clean, white thing.

"If it had been some other girl and not—Clare Marlowe——" She held her breath and Alan Trenchard laughed.

"Not a hope. Clare Marlowe was my dream-girl," he said. "The old man has thrown out hints, and I'm rather a romantic devil. I've not met many women, you see, and this Clare Marlowe became real. When you stepped off the steamer at Kalu you were just the dream-girl, come to life."

He held her close, while she blinded her soul to everything but him. And they were standing thus when, from behind the coco-nuts that fringed the lagoon, a small boat appeared. Trenchard's head went up and he stepped back, all at once vigilant and alert, with the second nature of the wild that had been his since childhood.

"Cousin Gerald back here!" he muttered. He looked ugly for a moment and his hand went to his pocket.

Slowly the dingy motor-boat cut the lagoon with its stub-nose. There were three men in it. A lean and languid figure at the tiller took off his sun helmet and sent a drawling hail.

"We saw you swamp and came as quickly as we could. Been fishing. We are just away home to Kalu. Take you and Miss Marlowe with pleasure."

Clare stepped into the boat as it came skilfully to the beach. It was Caesar Lorenquo who jumped up to hand her in. Sleath, monocle in his eye, barely looked at her. The Malay in the bows did not turn his hunched back.

"Charming rescue," said Caesar Lorenquo. "We're delighted. We're all squires of dames here. And of gentlemen too, of course, when they're in peril."

He smiled limpidly at Clare, his eyes wide open with admiration and excitement.

"Miss Marlowe?" he said. "I had not the pleasure of meeting you when I called upon Mr. Henry Marlowe in England a month or two ago. Indeed, I did not know he had a daughter so charming."

Her mouth felt dry, but with a great effort she kept her outward calm. She slipped her hand in Alan Trenchard's arm and felt his warm, strong body where his heart beat. That comforted her and loosened the trap she was in slightly; the trap that had sprung right in the sunlight of her happiness, out of that dark, smiling face opposite. They knew the secret, these two men in the nightmare-boat she had stepped into out of the beauty and colour of Ten Peacocks. Perhaps even the Malay knew it. Then Clare sat even more still than she had sat before. . . .

The Malay in the bows turned and showed the supine and expressionless face of Sam Dak, Henry Marlowe's servant.

He made no visible movement. But something came curving in a shining arc from his hand and stuck, humming, in the woodwork between Clare and Alan Trenchard.

"Only a shot across the bows," said Gerald Sleath, his eyeglass glittering. "Put up your hands gracefully, Cousin Alan."

CHAPTER SIX

NAG AND NAGINA IN THE TEMPLE

So unexpectedly came the spinning blade from Sam Dak's phlegmatic fingers that it was like some tropical insect which settled and hummed between Clare and Alan Trenchard almost before either could realize it. For a moment Trenchard was stupefied by the Malay's treachery and by Gerald Sleath's summons to surrender, but that was not for long.

"You very clever dog, Sleath!" he said slowly. "What's the game, I wonder?"

The automatic in the pocket of his shantung coat cracked and behind Sam Dak a splinter blanched the coaming of the *Joana Blum* as she throbbed stolidly through the blue swell.

Sam Dak, from his place in the bows, threw again swiftly.

Even as the young man squeezed the trigger a second time he felt a burning pang of pain shoot through the flesh of his upper arm and his right sleeve was pinned fast. Bending over, with a quick movement of his wrist, Gerald Sleath secured Trenchard's weapon while he still plucked fiercely to free himself.

"The advantage is always with the party who first springs the surprise, Cousin Alan," Sleath said gravely. "That is one of the maxims of war. And it is awkward shooting out of the pocket aboard a motor-boat in a nasty swell. Besides, Sam Dak could take the hind legs off a mosquito."

Clare looked at the deadly, good-looking face. Sleath's glance travelled over her, indifferent, yet scorching, then went back to Trenchard.

"Ask any questions, Alan, my dear fellow. I'm here to answer them."

Trenchard closed his teeth helplessly. Though some vague intuition of danger had touched him as he and Clare had stepped into the motor-boat he had ignored it, in his eagerness to get back from Ten Peacocks to Kalu and old Rajah David. Gerald Sleath, his cousin, was a beachcomber—white cargo. Hot-blooded old David Trenchard had vowed he would shoot him up if ever he set foot upon Kalu again.

"I'd like to know what this tricky business is about," Alan said slowly. "And—well, to begin with, why you scuttled the engine of my motor-launch while Miss Marlowe and I were on Ten Peacocks, for instance."

"Well," Sleath laughed, "the reason was obvious, wasn't it, when the thing conked out by the reef? You went over right enough, you and Miss Marlowe, but Johnny Shark was slow in the uptake, or something. You should keep a manlier breed of *carcharia* in that lagoon of yours, Trenchard."

Clare opened her eyes and saw that Sam Dak was binding Alan with some kind of grass thongs. The young man struggled, but it was only a moment before the curling lariat pinioned him firmly.

"Missie, *tuan*?" Sam Dak, speaking for the first time, looked questioningly at Sleath.

"Oh, no!" protested Lorenquo in a shocked voice.

Clare fought back her coolness again. The boat was heading

northwards—Clare knew that, by the sun—and was ploughing through a pilted, blue sea, leaving abeam the harbour and David Trenchard's house, visible like a white crumb on the hillside. Presently a low, swampy shore, thick with mangroves, came into view, and the motor-boat edged slowly into it. It was a desolate and uninhabited part of Kalu, Clare guessed, that glowing jungle, with its hum of insects which came like the sound of some sleepy music above the prob of the engine. It had the look of a rioting poison-garden, which caught human beings in its tentacles and held them till they slept. . . .

"Sleath," Trenchard, with a startled glance at his surroundings, spoke sharply. "Can I drive a bargain with you? I'm your meat, it seems. But I've a couple of thousand pounds' worth of pearls lying around on Ten Peacocks. I'll give you a chit to my headman for them if you'll promise a safe conduct home for Miss Marlowe."

Gerald Sleath dropped his cheroot with a hiss into the tawny water and remained as silent as stone. It was Cæsar Lorenquo who spoke. He threw a half-veiled glance at Trenchard's cousin and his voice was velvet.

"I think it is an excellent suggestion. Our business is purely with Cousin Ann. You see, Miss Marlowe, this is the River of Smoking Hearts. It is a deuced poetic name, is it not? Until Rajah David came, and for some time after, the Malays used to hold sacrifices in a temple they built—I rather think we're going to it—and took the *ghajungs* who were marked for sacrifice up this river in canoes. It was dashed uncomfortable when they got there, because their hearts were taken out with one slash of a *sundang* and thrown to the jolly alligators. Not that we're going to do anything like that to Cousin Alan—at least, I don't expect it. . . . What do you think of Mr. Trenchard's suggestion, Sleath? I consider it rather good. Mr. Trenchard gives us an order to his headman and we put Miss Marlowe some place where she can walk home to her—well, to her daddy."

"I wouldn't go," Clare said slowly. "Alan, dear, do Mr. Sleath and Mr. Lorenquo look as though they were the sort of white men who know what it is to keep any kind of promise?"

Fear fled from Clare. Her voice was low with quiet scorn.

* * * * *

There was a landing of teak logs, overgrown now with blossom and orchids, and the Temple of Smoking Hearts stood in what had once been a wide clearing. It was fashioned like a rough pagoda, of some black wood that still glistened silkily beneath the climbing undergrowth. Long ago, Rajah David had routed the degenerate tribe which had forsaken the Koran for some more savage cult. But, deep in that silent jungle, remote from the gentler parts of Kalu, their temple still stood.

"This is melodrama, Sleath." Alan Trenchard, helplessly pinioned, with Sam Dak by his side, spoke quietly. "I gave you credit for better taste, if you're quite sane, which I rather doubt. But evidently I was mistaken. Will you tell me what you intend to do with us now?"

Sleath nodded. Inside the square chamber it was almost dark.

"Life isn't much use without a bit of melodrama now and then, Trenchard. I'll sketch the next twenty-four hours for you. There will be a rumpus in Rajah David's palace when nightfall comes

without you. Every man jack will be set beating the island for you and Miss Marlowe. Some time to-morrow, probably, a party will come up the river and find your motor-launch moored outside the Temple of Smoking Hearts—we shall salvage it from the beach at Ten Peacocks and bring it here—and, in the temple, they will find the two lovers who strayed to see the sights of Falu."

"I see. With Sam Dak's knife——"

The other man's eyebrows went up.

"What has Sam Dak's knife to do with it? Didn't you know there was another name for this place since it fell into disuse, cousin? The Bughis call it the Cobra's Nest."

Gerald Sleath turned away carelessly and struck a match to light a fresh cheroot.

Trenchard sprang to the doorway as the two men passed forth into the green twilight and the butt of Sleath's automatic swung round to his temple. Dazed and stumbling, he fell back beneath the blow as the heavy door rumbled to. The muffled sputter of the motor-boat sounded on the river, and set a devil bird screeching.

"Clare dear!" Trenchard felt her soft breath on his face. Without any words she was working at the thongs which fastened him as he sat on the ground with his head hanging. A groan broke from him.

"Give me your knife." Clare was feeling in his pocket. "There must be some way out of this place, Alan. Oh, if only it wasn't so dark! It must be getting on for night-time, too. There!"

Alan gently put her aside. There was a musky, reptilian smell about the Temple of Smoking Hearts that brought back the memory of Sleath's purpose like the kiss of a blade. He trod warily to the door. Though, he guessed, the cobras which made the temple their haunt, would not come until the chill of nightfall sent them there from the jungle. The door was one solid block of blackwood, shaped and mortised to the curve of the thick wooden wall and strong as iron. Trenchard tried it with his shoulder. It was immovable. The heavy batten which closed it from outside was down.

Trenchard glanced up. At one time there had been a bamboo ladder to the upper platform where the alligator worshippers had performed their grisly rites. But it hung now, mere matchwood, with its lowest rung out of reach and crumbling visibly. In the jungle outside there came the far away "augh-h!" of a tiger that had missed its spring and the bark of a jackal. It meant that night was near, since the night-hunting animals were coming out.

Clare was beside some bedaubed block of wood which stood half-embedded in the floor, when he gained her side again. Now that their eyes were accustomed to the gloom it became revealed as a roughly carved and painted alligator's head.

"It's like the crocodile in 'Peter Pan'." Clare caught her teeth in a shuddering laugh. "But we can sit on it. Is there no way out, Alan?"

He moved again and stopped. On the floor, a yard away, there was a moving shadow and, as Trenchard stared, it split into two pieces which slipped past them. The little noise he made as he involuntarily drew up his foot caused one of them to pause for a moment, hissing faintly and swaying with his hood distended, and its beadlike eyes lighting up to topaz.

"Sit on the alligator, Clare. Lift your feet. Quietly!"

There was just room for the two of them. A little sighing sound whistled through the timbers above their heads. The night breeze. There were other noises—soft, rustling noises—and the shadows which lay upon the floor of the Temple of Smoking Hearts became moving things that ringed them in.

"As still as you can be, Clare dearest, bravest girl!"

Clare's hand crept into Alan Trenchard's. A heavy scent was rising, the scent of decay and poisonous flowers, and it made her feel as sleepy as a narcotic drug might. Each time she moved one of the shadows paused and swayed upright, hooded, bloated. They were cobras, she knew, and it was a jungle death that she, Clare Gray, who had so recently trod the pavements of prosaic London, faced. Only by thinking of other things could she keep cool and awake—of Henry Marlowe and Rajah David and of little mumsie, sitting in her garden and looking over the marshes where it would be broad afternoon at that hour. There was little chance of ever seeing daylight again. How short and sweet it had been! But it was time she told Alan the truth.

"Alan dear, I want you to listen to me——"

One of the shadows launched itself like a black spear, at the vibration of her voice. The soft click of its impact against the wood beneath her drawn-up feet came clearly. Trenchard's arm tightened about her and a little sigh of terror and relief came from Clare.

CHAPTER SEVEN

COCKTAILS BY LULA LING

THE lamps were lighted in David Trenchard's white house above the harbour of Selqueira Kalu. On terraces and in cool, mosquito-curtained rooms, soft-footed servants moved to kindle the lamps and to light the scented brazier which Rajah David burned of an evening.

"I should suggest dinner, Trenchard. I'm hungry as a hunter. Those two appear to be making a day of it from all appearances," observed Henry Marlowe with a smile. He stood against the verandah rail, long and spruce in evening clothes, a youthful figure in spite of his silvery hair.

Rajah David frowned momentarily. He was a martinet, and resented that, in any degree, Henry Marlowe should take the ordering of his household into his hands.

"We'll have another drink first. That boy ought not to have kept Clare out at Ten Peacocks until this time. Come here, Lula Ling!" He called the Chinese woman, who came gliding out of the house on her heelless slippers. "Have you noticed anything about those two young folk, Marlowe?"

"Full to the brim, Tuan Rajah?" asked Lula Ling, poising the shaker.

"That woman can mix a cocktail like a Philippine bartender." Trenchard nodded across to his companion as Lula Ling went out. "She's an artist. Did you hear my question, Marlowe?"

"It's rather an embarrassing one for a poor devil like me. If you want me to be candid, I think they're falling in love with each other."

"You do?" David Trenchard closed his wrinkled eyes, like a tired old eagle. There was a silence. Then:

"It was what I wanted you out here for, Marlowe, at the back of my mind. Not so far back, either. Since I saw that she was another edition of Amabel, I could hardly wait. I wanted to order 'em into it, like the old bashaw I am. If I can give my son a wife like Amabel, I'll die content."

Henry Marlowe sighed, and flicked the ash from his cigar.

"She's Amabel's image, I know. She has her nature, too"—the mobile lips were pursed sentimentally. One must have occasional amusement, thought Henry Marlowe inwardly, and this old rajah of Seiqueira Kalu, in his second childhood, was fair game. "But there'll be confounded little dowry for my daughter, Trenchard, I'm afraid. I'm broke."

"That!"—an imperious smile. "She'll be my son's wife, Marlowe. Ranee of Kalu. And you, if you wish to stay out here, will be well provided for after I'm buried up on the mountain yonder where I shall be able to see the *praus* come into the lagoon—" the old man paused musingly, ignoring Marlowe's protesting gesture. "It may come any day—the end. But I'd like to see them married before I go; ay, and maybe an heir on the way."

Rajah David leaned forward. The drink which Lula Ling had served seemed to have whipped his tired strength for the moment.

"You know my nephew, Gerald Sleath?"

"Slightly." In the dusk that hung over Kalu and drifted between the lamps of the verandah like the bloom of a purple grape, Henry Marlowe's figure grew quite still.

"He's a bad egg. But he's got round the Dutchmen, to some extent. If my race dies out they'll give him the commission to work this place, because he's my nephew. If I willed it elsewhere, they'd tear it up. They're great sticklers for the family system in their colonies, the Hollanders. If Alan had no children, or anything happened to him—well, Sleath might come in. And I'd rather see Kalu go down in an earthquake."

Rajah David started uneasily, as a clock chimed inside the house and the figure of a man came climbing the verandah steps. Henry Marlowe too, with a feeling of catastrophe which perhaps Sleath's name had brought, made a step forward.

"Omar!" it was the bearded Arab headman of Ten Peacocks who made an obeisance to Rajah David. "Where is *Tuan Alan*?"

"Nine hours since *Tuan Alan* and the missie left Ten Peacocks, Rajah David. I come from there now, to see the young *tuan* about the black pearls which Banji, the jeweller, was to make into a necklace."

Rajah David, his face changed and gaunt, struck a gong, which hung by his side. The reverberations were echoing through the bungalow and down to the waterfront, where it was heard above the twang of the samisen of the Japanese musician in Joe Sang's café.

"*Rajah David's summons!*"

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Clare raised her head very slowly from Alan Trenchard's shoulder. Her eyes were heavy and her body stiff. The agony of rigid muscles was so great that it seemed easier to lower her feet to the floor from the carved wooden beast upon which they sat without moving, and let happen at once what must come sooner or later.

"What's that?"

"Nothing. Only jungle sounds. Clare dearest, try not to move."

"How much longer is it till dawn, Alan? It seems such an eternity, doesn't it?"

Trenchard made no answer save a wry smile which Clare did not see. It was six more hours to dawn. The hot, sleepy scents of the Temple of Smoking Hearts would lull them unconscious long before then, Alan guessed. When they slept, they would fall. . . . Through little cracks and notches in the temple walls the moonlight filtered and fell in tinsel streaks across the floor.

"There's something outside, some bigger noise——"

"Imagination. It can't be Sleath and his crew. They've been here and gone away again, leaving the old launch moored on the river outside, as Sleath said. Proof of two foolish lovers who wandered into a temple—by heavens, though, there goes something! I heard it. Keep still, dearest, for pity's sake!"

Outside, the equatorial jungle fought and slew and fed in its midnight life. Came suddenly the shrill trumpeting of elephants and then, faint but clear down the river, the crack of a rifle. Then a long silence. . . . The anguish of Clare's cramped body became unbearable in that period of waiting.

A fusillade of rifle shots, nearer this time, the beat of paddles on the water, and the "hai-yai" of hunters. Some heavy body came stamping and crackling through the undergrowth, very near to that tomb of cobras which enclosed them. On the other side of the blackwood wall of the temple, there were elephantine gurglings and whimperings, and then a sound as though a giant hand fumbled at the batten which closed the heavy door. Last of all came a double shot and a heavy crash that jarred the temple.

"Look!" whispered Clare, unbelievably.

The floor, with its spangled moonlight, was clear. Not a green-black shadow remained upon it after that last crash.

Trenchard shouted, only to discover his voice hoarse, and relaxed. With limbs that gave at the knees, he stumbled from the painted block which had held them for so long, and hammered fiercely upon the closed door. It swung slowly open, letting in moonlight and a glare of burning flares that flooded the chamber. In the torchlight-filled clearing stood half a dozen natives, and beside the temple door lay the body of a dead elephant.

"Tuan Alan!"

A cry of astonishment broke from the hunters. Clare, relaxing her limbs in the moonlight with a long sigh, saw the tallest step forward. There was awe and some fear on his yellow-brown face.

"It's me, Baba," Trenchard said. "We were locked in the temple."

Baba, the hunter, touched his beard.

"The hand of Allah was in it," he said reverently. "Allah works in strange ways and is stronger than the cobra god. We were hunting Bintang, the rogue elephant. He ran away from his teak rolling a month since, *tuan*, after killing his keeper, and did much damage until we found he made his night lair in the temple here. He lies where we ran him to earth. And you live. Allah works in strange ways."

Dawn was coming up over the harbour of Seiqueira Kalu and the launch hissed softly through a sea of shot-silk towards it. Clare, curled up in a nest of cushions, stirred, to come awake with a shiver.

"I was dreaming of Allah," she said. "He was a bit like Baba, and a bit like Rajah David. Are we nearly home?"

Trenchard nodded. The motor-launch was undamaged, and ran smoothly. Sleath, to aid his circumstantial evidence, must have pumped it out and put the engine in working order with considerable efficiency. It made Trenchard smile grimly. There was a hunt awaiting for that human rogue, his cousin, as relentless as that which ended Bintang's career.

"You're jungle-blooded now, Clare," he said. "You'll be a fit Ranee of Kalu, please God. Are you afraid of the Islands now?"

"No," breathed back Clare, "not now. Not of the Islands. Not of—anything."

She felt it to be true. The night's terror had tempered her in some subtle way, and made her feel that she belonged to that tropic country, and to Alan. It was a new Clare who was going back to Seiqueira Kalu. She watched a fleet of boats shoot out of the harbour to meet them and on the water-front caught sight of David Trenchard's rickshaw, waiting with the straight figure of Henry Marlowe by its side.

"You young runagate!" Rajah David's voice shook with relief as they approached. "What do you mean by this?"

"Ask Cousin Gerald, sir. He got us. But that will wait a minute or two. There's another thing that won't"—the young man flushed and laughed as he gently drew Clare forward—"I've found a new Ranee for Kalu, Rajah David. I want to marry Clare."

"Quick work! And you, Clare?"

Hunger and tenderness was in the old man's faded eyes, banishing the livid menace which had come to him at Sleath's name. His hands went out slowly and rested on Clare's shoulders.

"Yes—I want to, please," Clare whispered, "if I—if I please you."

"We'll go up to the house," it was a shaky laugh that Rajah David gave. "I'm all in with the night's waiting and worry. We'll have Sleath flogged and put to sea with salt in his wounds—presently. I can't think of him now. It must be soon, Clare and Alan! Soon, remember!"

As the rickshaw started to climb the hill, his laugh rang out, triumphant and deep, like that of the goldenhearted adventurer who had come to Kalu fifty years before. The sound of it made Clare fall back, and touch Henry Marlowe's sleeve. When she looked at him she was very calm, though pale beneath her sunburn.

"I'm going to throw myself on his mercy," she said simply. "I'm going to tell him. Nothing can stop me now."

CHAPTER EIGHT

"DON'T TELL!"

THE resolution in Clare's voice was not to be mistaken. Marlowe glanced at her, and inclined his head slowly. He made no other sign.

"Very well," he said, without visible emotion. "If you have

decided, Clare. I only make one request. Let me be the one to tell Rajah David that I am a liar and an impostor. You may tell Alan. That will be fair enough division of the honours, I imagine."

"You see that we must, don't you?" asked Clare. She stood still and held Marlowe back, letting the rickshaw melt and disappear among the tangle of the garden till they were alone. "I want you to see it and agree. It was contemptible from the start. And I never wanted to think of you as—contemptible. I thought of you—as the straightest man in creation, Mr. Marlowe, from the beginning. Though, some way, when you suggested that I should pass for your real daughter, I had to agree. I've often wondered why. Oh, I'm not giving you the blame. It's mine as much as yours."

"An absurd touch of gratitude, perhaps," Marlowe returned, with a wry smile. "A notion on your part that, though I may only be an adopted parent, I might be as mildly wicked as the real genuine article when a chance of happiness and fortune came to you. Let alone a bit of sentiment for an old white rajah who hasn't long to live. Well, well! You've just passed through an unnerving experience, child. Go and sleep it off. Then we'll throw ourselves on the mercy of the Egyptians. But not till then. You promise?"

* * * * *

It was late afternoon when Marlowe awoke, too, refreshed. Clare was stirring. Marlowe saw the glint of her blue frock and the sheen of her fair head in the doorway. He was almost startled for a moment. It was as though Amabel came to him out of the shadows.

"My dear," said Henry Marlowe, "sit down. There's something I've kept hidden from you until now. It's rather important, because your mother comes into it."

"Mother?" Clare threw up a startled head.

"I didn't want you to know, because I was a bit jealous of her, I'm afraid. Oh, there's nothing disgraceful. We were conspirators together, that's all. But I wanted to take all the credit to myself, like an elderly fool."

"Please go on."

"Well, I'll make a clean breast. She was very poor, wasn't she? I hated to think of that, so I went down to Battersea to see her, without telling you. She was charming to me, but cold and proud—at first. And then she confessed that it was she who made you answer that advertisement, that the wording of it made her dream, as she put it, wild dreams of you. I envy you your mother, Clare."

Like a craftsman engaged upon delicate work, Henry Marlowe glanced at the still, delicate face before him.

"I got a letter from Rajah David. He didn't know my daughter—Thelma—had died. He wanted us both out here because, like other old potentates when they're near to death, he began thinking of his future peace. He had loved Thelma's mother long ago, as you know, and he had a son. . . . Well, your mother saw that letter. I suppose she compared Sequeira Kalu with Battersea, Clare, that plucky woman, and Kalu had it. Did it never occur to you that she let you go, willingly, in spite of the heartbreak it must have been?"

"Then she knew—you both knew before we started out here——" Clare's head swam. She could go no further. It was Marlowe who ended, with wistful irony:

"Of this fearful sin? We both knew, Clare. We both hoped."

He had finished his piece of craftsmanship. It was a work of art, Henry Marlowe considered. He never brought forth a lie unless it was nicely hammered and chiselled beforehand. There was no flaw that he could see in it. She was infatuated with young Trenchard, and this bringing in of her mother, this master-stroke, blew her conscience to fragments. The colour was rising in her cheeks and her eyes swam.

"I never guessed. I never thought you had met. But it was like mumsie. She was never too scrupulous—about me."

Clare closed her eyes for a moment. That dream, too! Behind her brain, soft and insistent, the words beat: "*Don't tell! Don't tell!*" It was her mother who, on that day she had come home from the doctor's, had shown her the advertisement with the fathomless smile she wore when she built castles in the air for her daughter. At times she could be very mysterious . . . "*Don't tell!*"

Alan was waiting in the palm-covered porch. A wind, sweet and salt, had sprung up, turning the lagoon below to wrinkled blue and setting the leaves dancing. Clare stood watching him a moment before he knew she was there; the lean, tanned face, hard chin and clean strength of him. He looked as though he ought to have loved many women. Yet she was the first . . .

Trenchard caught her silently. At her throat, with a laugh, he placed something that was cool to the skin.

"Black pearls," he said. "Out of the lagoon at Ten Peacocks. It always gave me what I wanted. Sleath didn't know that."

"Are they lucky?"

As his arm went about her, she crept close and felt the song of life thrill through her. Her boats were burned. She had pulled the sweet net about her with her own hands. Henry Marlowe and the little mother in far-off England could banish their fear for ever.

Nothing evil would happen now. Nothing could.

CHAPTER NINE

SHINING HAVEN

THERE was bunting and blossoms on the water-front of Kalu, every ship in the harbour was dressed, every woman on Kalu had wreathed herself in flowers, and in the far jungle and the distant lagoon hunters and fishermen were feasting for the wedding of Rajah David's son.

The bridal dress had come from Batavia, made by the hands of a Frenchwoman from the Rue de la Paix. Clare had unexpectedly discovered herself possessed of a personal maid. Old David Trenchard, with a gesture of triumph, had produced her.

"There's nothing she can't do," he said. "She was maid to the daughter of an old Chinese merchant prince over in Laut once. Her name's Lula Ling."

Clare was not sure at first whether she liked Lula Ling. She resembled some puckered idol that moved noiselessly about Rajah David's house, chanting softly to itself; an inhuman thing of yellow ivory. But she was deft and skilful as any Parisian born. In those moth-winged days that flitted towards the wedding, Lula Ling hovered about Clare like a useful shadow. During those days Clare saw little of Henry Marlowe, for which she was vaguely glad. But,

by the hands of Lula Ling, she had despatched a cable to little mumsie in her English cottage, ten thousand miles away, and the answer lay crushed next to her heart, a brief but sweet message :

God bless you and your husband, Clare, dear.

It brought a lump to Clare's throat to read it again, when she crept out of bed to the window of her room and looked down on the harbour late that night before her wedding. There was distant lightning on the horizon. One of the swift tropical storms was sweeping down on Kalu. But, late as it was, there was music and laughter on the waterfront. The *Maraquita*, Rajah David's steam yacht, rode in a welter of its own lights on the motionless lagoon, waiting to carry her and Alan away on their honeymoon next day. The house was very quiet, save for the boom of approaching thunder.

Presently she became aware of a soft, crooning sound. At first Clare could not place it. But the rattan door of the ante-chamber, where Lula Ling slept on her rush matting, had swung ajar as thunder shook the house. And to-night Lula Ling was not asleep. She stood, illuminated by the lights of the harbour and the flooding flashes of lightning, with something poised in her hand. Clare, in the doorway, recognized it. It was a goblet, carved from a single piece of yellow jade, which was Rajah David's favourite drinking cup. At first, Clare judged that Lula Ling was cleaning it. Yet, there was something in Lula Ling's low song that was like a witch's incantation.

Lula Ling tilted the goblet and clasped it, stem upwards, between the long fingers of one hand. With the other she steadied a tiny phial, from which, with each lightning flash, a golden drop dripped into the hollow stem. Her song rose in a soft chant. . . .

"What are you doing, Lula Ling?" Clare asked quietly.

The lamp switch flooded the room at her touch. There was a crash as the goblet dropped from Lula Ling's hand and struck the edge of the table. It lay on the carpet, with the stem snapped, and a sweet, piercing odour floated from it.

"So you would poison Rajah David? Why would you do that, Lula Ling, when he is so kind?"

Her fingers caught the woman's arm. She looked into the flat, wrinkled face. It was immobile. Oriental. Only the liquid eyes were drenched in terror.

"Are you going to speak, Lula Ling? Or shall I call the Rajah?"

"No call the Rajah, missie. No use. Lula Ling tell the truth." Suddenly Lula Ling flopped down on her knees.

"I'm waiting for the truth."

"Me tell you. Can one skip aside from avalanche of guilt? You strike me, Rajah David flog me." Lula Ling wagged her scraped and pomaded head. She began to rock herself. "And Tuan Marlowe, he perhaps kill me. Between devil and deep sea. Poor Lula Ling!"

"Who would perhaps kill you?" whispered Clare.

"Hai-yai! I said it. Tuan Marlowe would. Lula Ling promise him that it would be so secret. Grave itself not talk more inaudibly. He persuade her, pay her big money, say Rajah David already ride fast to his ancestors and it no much matter. Is it not correct for parent to work for happiness of offspring? So that his daughter should be Ran, quick, without waiting."

A weakness came into Clare's limbs, but she fought it away. This was too big for weakness of any kind. Her lover had called her the

bravest woman in the world. There was no room even for natural horror. She was caught too deep in things to do anything save keep her wits about her at any cost. Yet . . . Henry Marlowe! No suspicion that Lula Ling might be lying came to lighten Clare's misery and bewilderment.

"You *Tuan* Marlowe's daughter, eh, missie?" Lula Ling, still kneeling, sent an oblique glance. "You no be wicked daughter and give him away. Flower of *Tuan* Marlowe's heart. No harm done. No pain for Rajah David. *Tuan* Marlowe too kind-hearted."

"I don't believe you." Clare kept her voice steady. "Nobody would believe you. You're making up the story to shield yourself. Get up!"

Lula Ling obeyed. A shiver of repulsion passed through Clare.

"Goblet broken now," said Lula Ling. "Magic goblet, missie, with hole in handle. Old goblet—hundred years. Rajah David rage when he find it broken. No can poison him now. Lula Ling finished. Lula give *Tuan* Marlowe his money back."

Clare went to the window to draw in the sweet air. Even as she did so, a deep laugh sounded and a tall, dripping figure stepped in from the verandah.

"May I come in to say good-night? I saw the light as I came up the path, as wet as old Nick." Alan Trenchard came into the light. He made a grimace as he caught sight of Lula Ling.

"Thought you'd have been in bed long ago."

"I couldn't sleep." Clare forced a smile. "It's excitement, I think."

"Same here"—his eyes were deep and hungry—"and I was the guest of honour down at Joe Sang's. My people at Ten Peacocks, you know. You've no idea what a Malay stag send-off is like. The storm caught me when I was halfway home. You look pale, dearest—hullo, what's this?"

He bent down to where the broken goblet still lay on the carpet, and Clare made a quick movement to prevent him, but was too late.

"The old man's pet drinking tassie! He'll play the deuce with Lula Ling. Unless it happens to be you who broke it, and then he'll have it put under a glass case, with a silver plate to commemorate the event. Queer scent, isn't there? Like—what's it like?"

Until then Clare realized, with a pang of despair, she had never known she could be such a good actress, such a pitifully good liar, to the man she loved.

"It was my fault, I'm afraid. Lula Ling was showing it to me and I let it fall against the table. Can it be—it can't be repaired, Alan?"

"What distress!" Alan tilted her chin and kissed her gently. She felt her eyes flame back at him. "The old man has dozens of goblets. Too many, I'm afraid, for his groggy liver. And that one—I'm trying to place the queer smell. It's probably something in the jade. Chuck it out, Lula Ling. Sleep well, little pale Rance, till to-morrow."

He was gone. So was Lula Ling. She had glided away with the pieces of the broken goblet, and Clare went slowly back to her bedroom. Between the cool sheets, she tried to think clearly. Why should Henry Marlowe wish Rajah David to die, unless there was some deeper plot. And why—this was stranger—why did she

feel that she dared not even accuse him, that it was nearly as impossible to confront him with his own wickedness as it would be if she were really his daughter and must protect him?

* * * *

"They're gone. Hull down. That's life, Marlowe. Everything hull down, sooner or later."

Three hours past noon on Seiqueira Kalu. A sleepy haze over the great island garden. An odd silence in Rajah David's teak and marble house. Standing out between the turquoise sea and the blue peaks of Ten Peacocks a white yacht and a smudge of smoke, sinking slowly below the horizon. Rajah David lowered his glass.

"Honeymoon yacht!" he said. "I dreamed of that once, standing in the middle of the Strand, after I'd first met Amabel. No more of that. . . . Hullo, Lula Ling, where the devil have you been all this wedding day?"

David Trenchard swung his head, which was like that of a sick lion, to the doorway of the cool room. Both he and Henry Marlowe stared with curiosity at the Chinese woman. She was garbed in dazzling white that turned her skin to the colour of putty.

"Funeral, eh? That's where you've been. The young Rancee was sure you'd vamoosed. Who was it?"

"Lula's uncle, Rajah David. A man heavy with years and sickness, with one leg pushed deep into the catacombs. He die yesterday of eating aconite leaves without knowing and flutter skywards. Lula not give melancholy tinge to wedding, so creep away to funeral. Back now, to make Rajah a drink."

"Plenty ice, Lula." Trenchard closed his faded eyes. Marlowe had left him.

"Good drink, Rajah. Best Lula ever made. Take Rajah a long way into dreamland."

"New goblet, eh? Where's the old one?"

"Old one broken. This better." It was like an old nurse wheedling a child.

Henry Marlowe saw Lula Ling's virgin white figure glide from the room and, a moment or two later, slip down through the coloured sea of undergrowth. He watched her idly, as she paused and turned, and it seemed to Marlowe that the Chinese woman made a low kow-tow to the window of the room where David Trenchard sat.

Henry Marlowe yawned and dozed a little. It was cooler when he awoke and a wind was ruffling his white hair. He rose and passed into the house, tapping at the closed door of David Trenchard's room. There was no answer, and he opened it.

Rajah David sat in his chair by the window, his eyes wide open, as he looked out upon his kingdom, but his body very still. When Henry Marlowe, with a quick exclamation, touched him, he fell back a little, but his open eyes still rested upon Seiqueira and the far blue sea. Something dropped to the floor from his knee. It was a writing-pad, and Henry Marlowe saw his own name upon it:

Henry Marlowe,—The end is here and now. I feel it coming upon me, more suddenly than I thought. You must let the doctor look at me, Marlowe. I fear a lot of things all at once, though it may only be my imagination. Hunt Sleaph. He's dangerous. And I command you to send no message to Alan and Clare. They must not be brought back from their honeymoon—

The pencil had trailed. It lay on the floor at the feet of the dead Rajah David, who looked out, with a faint smile about his lips, at the kingdom which had passed to his son.

CHAPTER TEN

NARCISA

THE honeymoon yacht crept slowly into Manila Bay. An American destroyer dipped a friendly ensign, a Dutch gunboat saluted Rajah David's red and green flag and little sampans came jogging out. On the shore, Clare saw white skyscraper hotels, a long boulevard and great liners in the harbour.

"It's civilization," her husband said. "We'll not stay long, unless you wish, Clare."

"I don't care much," Clare answered, with a deep sigh. "I don't care much where we are, Alan."

He moved, with a laugh, to where the cool striped awning of the launch rose and fell by the landing ladder. Clare looked after him with an ache of delight. She was very happy. So happy that she was nearly afraid, so safe that she would perhaps forget . . .

For a little while, at least, she meant to forget. Clare picked up her husband's binoculars and leaned against the rail with them, aware of a strange reluctance to leave that dream-yacht. She could pick out the crowd which lounged outside the cafés watching the leisurely stream of automobiles as they passed along the river-front. There were white women there, too, American and Spanish, Clare judged. One of them sat with a man at a little table framed in palms and, with her chin resting on her hand, surveyed the *Maraquita*; a magnificently-dressed and very beautiful creature. Clare watched her through the glasses, with a momentary amusement at her own curiosity. The man, her companion, wore a batik tie and a mauve shantung suit, and his yellow shoes shone in the sunlight. His hair was black and sleek, his eyes soft and liquid.

It was Cæsar Lorenquo.

Clare lowered the glasses. A sense of slow but acute danger dawned upon her. Suddenly the *Maraquita*, with her white decks and cool cabins, seemed a haven which she must not leave. Why was Cæsar Lorenquo in Manila? If she looked again she would see the glitter of Gerald Sleath's eyeglass, perhaps, but she did not look again.

Alan stood by her side.

"The launch is ready, sweetheart. We're going to dine among a white crowd to-night for once."

"I don't think I want to, Alan. It looks a hot and dusty place."

"Not in the Hotel Escorial. You'd hardly know it from the Savoy or the Ritz. I've booked a table, my child. The head waiter would send out a flower-decked boat to fetch us if we didn't go. And I want to show off my wife."

As the launch bubbled towards the landing, she could see that the table by the palms which the man and woman had occupied, was empty now. The hoot of traffic and the clanging of tramcars assailed her ears; a homely sound. It washed out the scented East for a moment and made her forget the noiseless feet of Lula Ling, as well as the dark, suave face she had glimpsed ashore through the glasses.

They were standing at the kerb, when out of the languid crowd, a girl came. Clare saw her from a distance and watched her intently, recognizing Cæsar Lorenquo's companion. Milk-white of skin, sleepy-eyed and red-mouthed, she moved with southern grace, and carried her beauty like a flower.

Suddenly she stopped, and her slumbering eyes came awake with delighted recognition.

"Why, Alan!" she said softly.

At the sound of his name, Trenchard wheeled quickly. The lovely creature who had stepped before Clare's quick eyes from the crowd on the Manila water-front, was holding out both hands to him.

"Narcisa!" he exclaimed. "Of all the people!"

"It is I—the same. And this is Mrs. Alan Trenchard, the new Rancee, I think?"

The girl's voice was like golden honey, Clare thought, and her smile frank and charming. Her dress was that of a rich and sophisticated woman of taste.

"This is Señora del Agramonte, Clare. An old friend of mine."

"Señora Ramon de los Reyes del Agramonte and half a dozen names I've mislaid, Mrs. Trenchard, since Mr. Trenchard stands on ceremony. But I don't play the castanets a little bit well, and I live most of the time in Los Angeles."

Clare smiled back. With an effort she put the memory of Cæsar Lorenquo aside, whilst still keeping very alert and watchful.

"We came ashore for a little civilization," she said. "We're just on our way to dinner at the Hotel Escorial."

"Oh!" Narcisa del Agramonte pulled a disappointed mouth. She shot a quick look at Alan. "I thought I was going to tuck you both under my arm and show you my Manila. But, after all, a honeymoon is a private and confidential affair." Her glance went seawards, wistfully. "My husband died three months ago. You heard in the Islands, Alan?"

* * * * *

The dancers moved languidly and sensuously to the throbbing music. The ballroom of the Hotel Escorial, in Manila, was designed like a great Spanish *patio*, and had the star-dusted sky for its roof. The scent of vanillas blew in on the night breeze, and in little alcoves here and there old Granada lamps gleamed upon mantillas and shawls, half-fallen from olive shoulders. The drone of traffic and the murmur of the Pacific came in together through the arched windows.

The girl in Alan Trenchard's arms leaned back her willowy body to look at him. Narcisa del Agramonte put her hand to her hair, from which a flower had fallen. She opened sleepy-lidded eyes and sighed.

"This is very nice, Alan," she said. "But I want to sit down. I've something important to tell you."

She disengaged herself gently. Her voice went through the dancers to where Clare danced with a bronzed young Virginian, an officer from a destroyer of the Pacific Squadron, which ticked its searchlights in the harbour. When her opal eyes returned to the young man they were studiously cool, but a flame burned behind them, hot and unpitying, yet hungry.

There was a pause, then:

"You've heard nothing from Kalu? Something's happened. You'll hear it to-night when you get back to the yacht, Alan. Rajah David's agent will take it aboard. Can you bear bad news bravely? Everybody has to at some time or other in his life. The Rajah died the day you left."

"Died?" There was a moment's stupor in Trenchard's voice. "But he was well—for him——"

He started to his feet, with a sound of grief and self-blame. Selfish young hound to go away on his honeymoon. . . . But the old man had insisted. He must have told Marlowe, like the obstinate old lion he was, that they must not know. . . .

Narcisa pulled him to the chair again with a soft hand.

"You must keep your courage, Alan, *amigo*. He was a sick man, was he not? Now and then we heard about him in Manila. After Ramon died I listened for news from Kalu. I am sentimental, you understand, and those were happy days I spent there. Once I thought of coming back, but it was—too late. Most things with me are too late." Narcisa paused. She was looking down and turning a ring on her finger, with her red mouth drawn. "But—oh, I have to be cruel to-night, Alan. How shall I tell you? Listen. There's some rumour that the Rajah was poisoned."

He stared and said harshly:

"Go on. I'm listening."

"It may be only gossip. It came here this morning from Batavia, where there are newspapers. The Dutch doctor, was suspicious, it is said, and told the police. They're looking for a Chinese woman called, I think, Ling—Lula Ling. Looking for her as far as Manila, which is why, I suppose, the news came. She is thought to have poisoned the Rajah with aconite, or something similar."

Trenchard started and then stayed still. Aconite! When had he recently smelt the bitter-sweet odour of aconite? He passed his hand across his forehead. A sudden lassitude passed into him. He and Clare, sailing the misty islands on their honeymoon, while all this was happening! He caught sight of Clare's bright head across the dancers. All at once it seemed an eternity since he had sat down in that alcove with Narcisa.

"Damn that band! Forgive me, Narcisa. But—it's a horrible jar, all this. If the old man hadn't sent the *Maraquita* away, deaf and dumb—that's over now. Clare and I will have to weigh anchor and get back to-night."

The room blurred a moment. Then he was cold. In the East, the white man dared have no mercy upon the poisoner.

"I must go. Thanks, Narcisa, for—breaking the news."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

ACONITE

HALF AN HOUR later Alan Trenchard and his wife stood together in their cabin aboard the *Maraquita*. The soft lap of water and the faint hum of a dynamo in the engine-room alone broke the silence as they faced each other. It was Clare who found words first.

"Poisoned?" she said slowly.

A moment's unsteadiness about her made her husband step closer.

"It's made you ill, darling! I kept it to myself till we got aboard, and then made it too sudden, I'm afraid."

Clare shook her head. But she remained deathly pale.

"I'm all right, Alan. I can stand it. But it's so horrible. Poor Rajah!" She hid her face in her hands. Trenchard caught her wrists.

"He wouldn't suffer, dearest! Aconite, as the Chinese use it, is painless unless they wish it to be otherwise. It was that woman, Lula Ling. I can't understand why. There was always something a little beastly about her, true, but he made a sort of pet of her. There was somebody else behind it, whoever it was, I'll hunt him stiff." He began to pace the cabin, turning cold and bleak again as his thoughts moved. "Whoever it was. We ought to get under way this minute, but there's no steam, and more than half the crew are ashore. I let them go, thinking we'd be here a few days. It'll be dawn before we can start."

Clare looked at his fierce young face and then turned away. He was Rajah David's son in his new-born strength and relentlessness. He would have no mercy. A deep shudder passed through Clare, and she hid it with difficulty. The cabin, with its teak and silver fittings, its exquisite furniture, turned into a trap. Like the beat of a bell came Lula Ling's betraying words as she had stood with the broken goblet, on the night before her wedding. A cry of self-reproach was all but wrung from her. Why had she left Henry Marlowe alone with Rajah David? True, she had thought Lula Ling had fled. But Lula Ling had come back, and found another goblet. . . .

"What's the motive, Clare?" Trenchard stopped in his stride. "What motive could anyone have had?" he demanded. "Everybody loved the old Rajah."

"Except"—Clare steadied her voice—"your cousin, Gerald Sleath, perhaps, Alan."

A wonder possessed her, at herself. If anyone told her that, knowing Henry Marlowe to be guilty of brutal and cowardly murder, she would try to shield and divert the trail elsewhere, she would never have believed it.

"It might have been Sleath," agreed Alan slowly. "When we get Lula Ling we'll know. I'll get the truth if I have to torture the woman for it."

Trenchard stole up to the deck, where Dowie, the Scots skipper, greeted him with an exasperated grunt, his red beard in the air.

"It's a real vexation, Mr. Trenchard, those boys all being ashore. I've sent to scour 'em out of every native dive in Manila, but it might be quicker to get a fresh crew and leave 'em. They're Kalu men, and they'll come home bringing their tails behind them. What do you say, sir?"

"We must be under way by dawn. I don't care how it's done."

Both men stopped and looked over the rail at that moment. Across the star-gemmed water of Manila Bay the phosphorescent trail of a launch came, shooting straight at the *Maraquitta's* starboard side. The slim craft swooped in neatly to the boat ladder, and a voice hailed it.

"Mistah Trenchard?" It was a giant negro in uniform who scuttled up the ladder. He saluted, grinning. "From Señora de

los Reyes del Agramonte, sah, wit' her kind compliments. Private and confidential, sah."

He was gone, leaving the letter, with its faint perfume, in Trenchard's hand. The young man looked down at it with a momentary wonder. Something Narcisa had forgotten to tell him, perhaps some further news from Kalu. . . . He went down the companion to his cabin with it.

Something fluttered to the floor from the letter as his fingers slit the envelope, and he bent to pick it up. It was a cutting from an English newspaper—an advertisement. Trenchard scanned it slowly, frowningly, and without any understanding.

A gentleman, lately returned from the East and now living in the country, requires a private secretary to assist him in important work. The young lady must be cultured and of attractive personality, of the Scandinavian type, but with dark brown eyes. This for a private and sufficient reason which will be explained to the successful applicant. Age about twenty-two. Previous experience not essential. Apply by letter, with photograph, to Mr. Henry Marlowe, Bittern Grange, Great St. Mary, Essex.

Slowly Alan Trenchard put the cutting down. One of those intuitions which come to human beings at such moments urged him clamorously to destroy unread the letter which accompanied it. Inevitably it passed, and he read slowly:

I dared not tell you everything this evening. I could not stand face to face with your hate. I could not bear to watch your happiness being wrecked. So I send you this letter and the newspaper advertisement, which has come into my hands, it matters not how. Your Clare is not Henry Marlowe's daughter. She is nothing more than a fraud. Perhaps you will still love her. I know not, because men are strange, good men like you. This I know. Henry Marlowe's daughter died years ago, and your Clare is the girl who answered his advertisement.

The letter ended abruptly with "Narcisa." After he had read it, Alan Trenchard lowered it in his hand. He stood staring at nothing. Laboriously, he tried to understand. If this was true, Clare was not the daughter of Amabel, the woman his father had loved, nor Henry Marlowe's daughter. She and Marlowe had come to Kalu for some purpose of their own which included marrying him . . .

He dropped into a chair. Narcisa might be lying. But that newspaper cutting was not likely to be. As yet, he felt no pain, only a deep bewilderment. He was a man anæsthetized. It was that damned perfume Narcisa used on her notepaper. He had scented some perfume before, recently—different, but it reminded him. Where?

"No!"

He cried out in a whisper as memory came; a room with an open window after a thunderstorm, Clare in a kimono, Lula Ling, the Chinese woman, bending over a broken goblet from which a faint, pungent scent came, Clare's momentary terror. Aconite. He remembered now. Aconite.

There was a decanter on the sideboard and he poured himself out a stiff three fingers.

"Clare!"

Those slender, freckled fingers! No, they did not do it, only through Lula Ling. She was too fastidious. She employed other fingers and used her brain, that clear, clever brain of hers. And her

courage. It must have required immense courage, the whole adventure. Not many women would have dared tackle it, but Clare was no ordinary woman . . .

He felt weak and relaxed. Not Rajah David's son, but a sensitive schoolboy cruelly tricked and left alone with phantoms which he dared not face—yet.

This was torment. The decanter was better, and then a short sleep from which he might awake with the red mist out of his brain. Trenchard moved wearily away from the rail.

As he did so, something stirred in the shadow. He snapped out sharply: "Who's that?"

His arm went up with an involuntary movement of self-preservation. A glinting arc curved through the air. He saw it too late to step aside from the bullet-swift projectile. Recognition came and went in the same instant, as the knife, flung like a stone with its heavy hilt first, struck his temple.

Sam Dak stepped from the shadows, picked up the knife, and stood looking down at Trenchard with satisfaction upon his wooden features. His body, naked save for a dark slip about his loins, and smeared with oil from head to foot, glistened in the starlight. Leisurely, he lifted Trenchard's form and flung it over his shoulder. From one of the rail stanchions, a rope ran over down the *Maraquita's* side to a small rowing boat, well hidden from above beneath the swell of the yacht's lines. Sam Dak, like some hairless sea ape which had come up out of Manila Bay, was swarming silently down it with his burden, in the same moment that the *Maraquita's* funnel began to bellow softly with a full head of steam.

CHAPTER TWELVE

- WINKING BLIND -

AT the House of the Winking Blind, which stands by a low tide-water creek on the Pasig River, where the floating human scum of all the Philippines gathers, one can buy anything from a brand new Bible to a pocketful of raw chandu that would fetch a little fortune in Antwerp or San Francisco. Here, assassins, or perfectly honest but half-hocused sailormen, can be hired. One may also meet here women who once ran away from their husbands, missionaries for whom the Devil has been too much, and fallen American and English gentlemen—like Gerald Sleath. The House of the Winking Blind has translucent oyster-shell windows and is made mostly of bamboo. It looks open to the four winds. But it is closed as the mouth of death and no one has penetrated half its secrets.

Two men waited on the rickety landing-stage of the House of the Winking Blind when the Southern Cross was getting lower in the sky, an hour or so after midnight, and looked out across the water. One of them broke the silence with a low laugh. He rubbed his hands together, not nervously, but with a crisp sound.

"The bounder fought me. He played merry hell in spite of a slight disadvantage. Have you ever had a fracas with a man who has a knife sticking in his kidneys, Sleath, old dear? It's most creepy-crawly."

"Who fought you?" The other asked the question absently, without turning his face from the quiet creek that opened to the bay.

Cæsar Lorenquo grinned.

"The captain from the Land of Cakes. Dowie. He's the subject under discussion. He came from a place called Tilliebag, or some such comic cognomen. I found letters from his grandchildren in his pocket. One of them asked him to send a small monkey back home to Tilliebag. I don't think he will."

"Oh! He had a red beard, hadn't he? There's only one cure for a habit like that, Cæsar."

"He's cured," said Lorenquo under his breath.

"One o'clock!" Sleath muttered. "We should hear Sam Dak's oars soon."

The man was all tensile steel. He resembled some panther which had missed its spring once, and knew that if it missed again the hunter's bullet would find it. In his lifetime he had gambled for big stakes, but none for bigger than now. The frigid brain within him went over it all again, testing the weak places of his plan. He had come hot-foot to Manila, as soon as he had learned that Rajah David was dead and the honeymoon yacht was bound there. Narcisa del Agramonte was in Manila, and long before, he had shrewdly guessed her interest in his Cousin Alan . . . He had gone boldly, carelessly to her, and laid his cards on the table, given her the newspaper cutting which Lorenquo had thoughtfully brought back from England, and had driven a bargain with her . . . Dealing with passion, his was the master hand, because he was passionless . . . She only made one condition, and that was that Cousin Alan should remain unharmed. Suavely, he had agreed, though he had sucked in his cheeks at it when he was alone . . .

The House of the Winking Blind creaked, as though with excitement at bigger happenings than usual. From one of the rooms came the song of a Chinese woman, crooning softly. The song rose in quarter tones and minor cadences, with no music in it to Western ears. Undertone to it, was a low murmur of men's voices and the rattle of dice.

That was the new crew of the *Maraquita*. Aboard her were perhaps half a dozen of the old crew. *Maraquita* was only a trim three hundred tons and carried no further officer save her captain, who lay at that moment in a cellar of the House of the Winking Blind, where his body had been carried from the narrow street in which he had met murder, quick and dark.

"Perhaps his red beard will act as a sail. It is certain to stick up, it is so tough. What do we say when we reach Kalu, Sleath?"

The other turned at the sound of Lorenquo's soft question by his side.

"We reveal a domestic tragedy, perhaps. Who knows? The stage is set. In Manila, the young Rajah, driven insane by the discovery of his wife's perfidy, goes ashore and disappears. His cousin, Gerald Sleath, gravely suspecting that her accomplice Marlowe has something to do with the death of Rajah David, takes charge of the yacht, with the wretched girl aboard, and conveys her back to Kalu. It's the sort of story for the pious Dutchmen to swallow. Yes, that sounds good. Not a flaw, Cæsar, save the old saw about the best laid schemes of mice and men."

"Here comes Sam Dak," he said.

"Well?"

"*Tuan* Alan is here, master. Missie on ship, shut in cabin, fast asleep. Four sailors only aboard getting steam ready. All Malay boys."

"Take him inside. Give him to Lula Ling."

"Gosh!" Lorenquo, whose nerves were taut, jumped. "She here? That female cobra! Are you the devil's emissary, Sleath?"

* * * * *

Trenchard recovered his senses slowly. Or rather, behind a queer layer of stupor which would not move from his brain, consciousness began to function. For a while he remembered Sam Dak in the gloom of the *Maraquita's* deck and the crash of the flung knife-hilt against his temple, with an odd sense of foolishness, but no other emotion.

"You thirsty?" a voice asked. "Like big dlink, eh?"

He was. His tongue left like a loofah in his mouth. The drink was long and cool, and slightly astringent. Now that his heavy eyelids opened, he looked at the person who held the deep porcelain cup, and saw the tranquil yellow face of Lula Ling.

Lula Ling. She squatted upon a blue cushion in the middle of the little room and watched Alan Trenchard out of almond eyes which seemed to have been nicked in the flat, tallowy face by a delicate knife. A lamp still burned at the ceiling, and shone on her scraped hair, but dawn was not far away from the latticed windows of the House of the Winking Blind.

"So this is where you are, Lula Ling," said Alan, slowly.

His speech felt hoarse and dragging and his mouth was already parched again. Yet the blow of Sam Dak's missile had been only a glancing one, for the wound at his temple scarcely ached.

"*Hai-yai, tuan*, I am here. Lula Ling pop up everywhere like bad dollar. This is the House of the Winking Blind in Manila. It holds you safe. Does fish jump from cormorant's mouth? No can make escape. No want to, eh? Plenty big dlink here."

Sickness poured over Alan Trenchard as memory returned ruthlessly. . . . Clare sleeping in the cabin of the *Maraquita*, Clare the impostor, Clare that night after the thunderstorm with Lula Ling and her broken goblet. It was like the return of a pain in a limb which had been amputated. Yet again, for a moment, the clamour within him was purely physical; an arid thirst that flogged all his throat. It sunk every other pain, mental or physical.

"You thirsty again, eh?"

He drank greedily and drained the cup with a long sigh, while the Chinese woman watched him with a solicitude that yet had a touch of the satanic.

"No more," murmured Lula Ling. "Lula Ling strict nurse. Good dlink that, and plenty more, but too much do more than Lula Ling want. Swell and go bang-bang. No want that."

Trenchard laboriously sought to catch the meaning of the words, but his brain felt too heavy. His body lay on a mattress, only lightly bound with a few strands of hemp, and he could see the discoloured walls, and hear a gentle lap of water outside as the dawn breeze whipped it. Lula Ling, he noticed, was dressed in white, and had her hair scraped and pomaded like a geisha. She was smoking, and there was a little heap of cheroots growing on the floor by her side. At the bottom of the cup he had emptied, lay a tiny crystal or two.

The cup was made of buffalo horn. Trenchard saw all these things, yet they were only details of a dream in which deadly peril loomed like a monstrous shadow, but remained shapeless. . . .

"You no go by-by again,"—Lula Ling flicked his eyes softly with her fingers—"By-by in company no good gentleman's conduct. Me wake you up with talking. You listen *tuan*. Pursuing footsteps of police after Lula Ling, ch? Fat Dutchmen and Malay boys and American detectives, hai-yai. Lula Ling send Rajah David into peaceful oblivion for good. You know that? And *Tuan* Marlowe, he know it. And missie, the new Ranee, ch? Lula Ling always obey orders."

"So—it was they? You're telling me the truth, Lula Ling?"

"Why not? Does hawk hover above pigeon's nest for nothing? Never mind. You forget, soon," said Lula Ling soothingly. "No hurt you soon, *Tuan* Alan. Nothing hurt you."

Trenchard put his hand to his head. His wits were clearer, though the savage thirst was coming back. He must talk, if he was to keep cool and get out of that house by some means. It might be better not to come alive again, but he was Rajah David's son, and must fight till he went down. . . . People were moving stealthily in the other rooms. He could hear them. The door opened and a little black Negrito sidled in, bearing a tray with chop-sticks and some white fish, which he set with a small green bottle before Lula Ling. Trenchard waited until the thin-legged, dwarfish creature had glided out again.

"Why did you do it, Lula Ling, you devil? The Rajah had always been kind to you. I can't understand you."

"Poor Lula Ling! She no money, and *Tuan* Marlowe and missie vellee rich. They say 'Take care not hurt Rajah David, Lula.' Kind hearts more than coronets, Rajah Alan. All got kind hearts, *Tuan* Marlowe, Lula Ling and——"

"Be quiet!" said Trenchard with a groan, then: "What's the game now? It was Sam Dak who dropped me on the *Maraquta* last night, wasn't it?"

The thought of Gerald Sleath went through him as he remembered the Malay. Sleath! Did he come into the tangle some way? His head was too benumbed to tease it out.

Lula Ling answered tranquilly.

"Sam Dak, *Tuan* Marlowe's servant in England. Missie told you that? Does faithful servant disobey loving master? Yacht gone back to Kalu, and left you here. Never mind. Soon forget. Sunset and evening star. You soon forget, *Tuan* Alan."

Trenchard clambered unsteadily to his feet. The thing was to get out of that place. Clare couldn't be concerned with that shanghaiing. He knew the idea to be monstrous, if only because she was too clever, too . . . subtle. There was something else behind it all. Even as he made a step towards the door, he stopped short and looked down at a rope which tethered him to the wall, realizing his captivity for the first time. For the first time, too, Alan Trenchard saw that he was not in the evening clothes he had worn the night before. They had been changed for him, and he was garbed in a shabby and greasy nondescript suit and worn boots that left him no better shod than any dock-loafer.

An oath left him. It came as hoarse as a crow from his scarified

throat. Once more a fierce thirst was beating all through him again, and, in a species of delirium, he snatched at Lula Ling's green bottle, but she swung it mockingly away from him.

"No *Tuan Alan's* drink," she said, chidingly. "You had enough. Greedy *Tuan Alan*. You wait. You forget everything soon. No sleep, but forget. Blank space. Nice."

He realized then. That was why his brain was reeling in a dream. This Chinese Borgia, who was a past expert in poisons, quick and slow, fatal and otherwise, had given him something from her lethean cup which at that very moment was doing its work inexorably.

* * * * *

It was the maddening gurgle of water against the bamboo poles of the House of the Winking Blind that kept Alan Trenchard from sinking into complete insensibility. That, and a breath of cool wind which blew through some unseen chink upon his dry, hot skin, and kept him anchored to reality.

There was a space of time when he knew himself to be in delirium, but it was cool delirium, where Clare, a fresh and innocent Clare, came to him, with dewy kisses and soft hands and her very voice was ice, lilting and tinkling in a cup. Then he was awake, crouching on the floor, with the burning desert in his throat again.

It was broad daylight though the lamp still burned its sickly flame at the ceiling. Lula Ling sat on her cushion, as still as a joss of her own race, and as inanimate. For, though she sat upright, her eyes were blind crescents. She had gone to sleep.

Trenchard crawled the length of the tethering rope, moved by his tormenting thirst. His hand crept avidly to the green bottle and lifted it, but the few drops of spirit remaining only stung his swollen tongue. He sat on his haunches like some chained animal, his eyes roving the room for liquid—any liquid.

His glance alighted upon a squat, long-necked, straw-covered bottle, half-wrapped in a cloak which the Chinese woman had evidently put down in a corner of the room. It looked like one of the bottles of raw Spanish Chianti which one could buy in any of the shops in Manila. But it was out of reach.

He was moving quietly, with a cunning that went no further than his desire to reach the long-necked bottle before Lula Ling should awake. For Trenchard, all the room, all the House of the Winking Blind, was that bottle, swollen big. But, suddenly, as he crept on all fours, his hand went into a little pile of the smoked butts of Lula Ling's cheroots, and touched something that rattled. It was a box of matches.

There was no sound in the House of the Winking Blind. It dozed at the edge of the tidewater creek, in the morning sunshine, like a thousand other of its rickety fellows, creaking slightly, but otherwise so silent that the dry scuttle of a tarantula spider over the lattice was quite audible. Trenchard gently scraped half a dozen matches into a flame and held them, with a shaking hand, beneath the rope that fastened him to the wall. It was a thin but stout three-strand cord, dry as tinder from lying in the sun. Within a minute, it snapped and he was free. The temptation to scuttle across to the long-necked bottle shouted through him, became agonizing. But Lula Ling, her head nodding slightly now, still slept, and left him a chance of freedom. Trenchard struck more matches and burned

through the cord which hobbled his legs. Sweating in every pore, he came stiffly to his feet—free.

In later years, Alan Trenchard only remembered those moments dimly. He had snatched up the bottle from beneath Lula Ling's cloak and raised it to his lips before he noticed that it was stoppered. He clawed at it and then made to smash its neck against the wall. As he did so another object caught his eye. It was a large earthenware pitcher standing in the dim corner. He saw the cool glimmer at its lip.

"Water!"

It was sweet and cool and the half-delirious creature which seemed to have stepped from him and moved by his side like a shadow, gulped it greedily. Light-headedly, he dashed his hand across his lips, feeling for a moment, the strength run into him.

A shrill cry sounded behind him. Lula Ling had come awake. Trenchard sprang to the door as it opened, thrust inward by some unseen hand at Lula's cry. He crashed his fist into a dark face and kicked with his knee at a protuberant middle, in one and the same moment, and was out over the squirming body he had felled. It was a narrow passage-way from which a warren of rooms seemed to open; all rattan doors and dingy curtains. A Chinese boy with a slop-pail—for it was evidently the slatternly hour of the House of the Winking Blind—leapt from his knees with a yell and ran before the apparition. From behind one of the curtains, something slashed out at Trenchard and missed him by a hair's-breadth.

He stood, breathing hard. He had reached the staircase which ran upwards and downwards at the end of the corridor. Below, he judged, was the way of egress, the street and freedom; but the bare-footed little Negrito who had brought Lula Ling's breakfast stood there, fingering a knife, grinning wickedly and shaking his head vehemently. The House of the Winking Blind had its stations for such emergencies.

A soft patter came behind him. Lula Ling, gliding noiselessly.

"The bottle!" she said. "Give me the bottle!"

Trenchard, aware for the first time that he still carried the long-necked bottle, hardly knew what answer that delirious shadow of his made. But Lula Ling stabbed herself forward, her fingers outstretched, not a woman but a yellow eldritch. With a loud laugh, he swung the object of her desire over her head, and saw her cringe beneath it, as though it had been a brand of fire.

The Negrito, who had crept close, struck. The blow missed, save that it ripped Trenchard's sleeve. He turned and ran up the flight of stairs behind him to the upper storey. There was no other way for a man armed with nothing more deadly than a long-necked bottle, and a hot glow of sunlight on the landing above told of some window. It might open out to the wilderness of roofs and crazy wooden buildings which clustered by the riverside, where the fire-zone of the city ended, and the palatial buildings gave way to the rattan warren of the native quarter. Through that window might lie freedom.

"The bottle!" shrilled Lula Ling.

Half a dozen brown and yellow faces were swarming up the gimcrack staircase beneath him. Wild-eyed and laughing, the delirium-stricken shadow of Alan Trenchard flung the long-necked

bottle down among them. It missed them and instead struck the thin balustrade of the staircase, ricocheted, and slithered against the wall. Through the House of the Winking Blind went a shriek such as even that den of whispered evil had seldom heard. Lula Ling's bottle had burst with the dull explosion of a gas-shell and its contents spurted across the staircase in a splashing jet.

The staircase of the House of the Winking Blind was empty. Like a herd of animals, the brown and yellow faces had stampeded. On its steps a pool of vitriol hissed and smoked and burned, biting and scorching as it trickled slowly down, and a figure which had lost all the kinship to humanity it had ever had, wailed and beat at its eyes with talon fingers; fingers that smoked and were wiped on the white funeral clothes; clothes that came into holes beneath the wiping fingers . . .

Trenchard turned blindly to the window; or rather the part of him which was still under the influence of Lula Ling's drug, did. The real Alan Trenchard was guessing with dim horror at what Lula Ling's purpose had been. The vitriol had been for him. To that dead creature who had once been the Water Lily of Laut, death had grown insipid, perhaps. But a half-idiot and disfigured white man, who was really the Rajah of Seiqueira Kalu, wandering in the kennels and rat-houses of Manila was a piquant idea.

A long shudder passed through the roughly-garbed man who climbed out of the window and dropped upon the steep slant of the tiled roof below. His shoulders sagged and he looked with lack-lustre eyes at the stretching expanse of roofs and distant spires, of crowded river and blue bay. He wanted only to sleep, after one more long draught of water. Some shutter was slowly sliding-to in his brain, shutting out all motive power, save the sense of self-preservation which remains in all animals while consciousness lasts . . .

He dropped lightly from a low cornice into a narrow street, and ran; ran looking neither to right nor left. The native shopkeepers, taking down their shutters, or standing sleepily beneath their swinging signs, saw only a frightened American sailor who, after a rough night in one of the riverside dives, had broken free from the vultures and was wisely making his way with all haste, back to his ship.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

MR. JUSTICE ME

GERALD SLEATH sat in the smoke-blue and silver cabin, with a volume of Montaigne's *Essays* in his hand, and looked up at Cæsar Lorenquo's approach.

"All serene?" he inquired lazily.

"Merry as a marriage bell—or a honeymoon yacht. This is a pretty boat of yours, dear old Sleath. I am no jolly Jack Tar, but it suits me. . . . I wonder where Cousin Alan is now?"

"Lord! You're like some old spinster, Cæsar, trotting round after ship's gossip. Cousin Alan is in Manila."

"Alive and kicking, no doubt."

Sleath answered carelessly. But there was a pucker of white round his tight mouth.

"In a way. Didn't Lula Ling explain? I remember, there

wasn't time. She had some plan or other. I left it to her. It was connected with a little acid and one of her queer drugs by way of disguising the troublesome young man. She's an uncanny creature.

"I didn't harm him. It was Lula Ling, the jade. I left him with her. If she chooses to treat him so that Señora del Agramonte would set her dogs on him at her back door if he reached it, and he wouldn't know Kalu if he saw it, what's that to do with my promise?" Sleath made a gesture of impatience, and asked, "Have you interviewed the ex-Ranee yet?"

"Not yet. I was waiting for your permission." Lorenquo's eyes glistened eagerly.

"Admirable Cæsar!" A touch of irony came into Sleath's manner. "Here is the key of the cabin."

Cæsar Lorenquo went first to his own cabin and brushed his hair till his scalp tingled. Then he went to the closed cabin door with one last stroke of his hair, knocked gently, waited and unlocked it. He paused almost timidly in the doorway.

"How brave you are!" murmured Lorenquo. "And how beautiful! May I say that?"

Clare looked back steadily, very pale, but collected.

"I guessed that you would be concerned in all this," she said. "Perhaps you will be good enough to tell me what has happened?"

She felt icy cool. Her hands had been steady as she dressed behind the locked door to the throb of the *Maraquita's* screw and Manila Bay had glided past the port-hole. It had not been easy to wait through the dragging hours that followed, and, once, she had all but thrown herself at the door to beat at its panels with her hands. But that mood had passed, and she knew that, whatever happened, she must keep courage and wit till the end.

"The yacht is Sleath's now," said Lorenquo. "Not exactly chartered, of course. But we took it over in the small hours. It was a sort of piracy, I'm afraid."

"Where is my husband?"

"He is behind in Manila. There is a lady friend of his there. In his great mental distress, I think he has decided to stay with her. That is putting it baldly. I don't know the exact details of the affair. But I think there is some sex appeal in it."

"And I think you are a poor liar, Mr. Lorenquo. Why can't you tell me the truth? I can't hurt you at the present moment, can I?"

"Listen earnestly, Miss Clare. I speak as a friend—yes! And I know the gospel truth when I see it. The crash has come and Alan Trenchard knows all the story of your adventure now. It was gallant, breath-taking, but—now you throw in and begin, perhaps, another. Never say die, eh?" Lorenquo was talking eagerly, almost pleadingly. "You heard that Rajah David was dead—poisoned. Things like that happen in the Islands sometimes. Narcisa told Trenchard about it at the hotel. But she told him more, by letter. He knows you were Henry Marlowe's secretary and not his daughter, also that you were a gallant adventurer. He saw the cutting from the English newspaper and it sent him crazy for a while. Then he went ashore, while you slept, and never returned. Honour bright."

"It sounds quite convincing, Mr. Lorenquo." Clare shook her head and fought off a chill which began to creep through her. "And

"I'm sure your honour is bright. But, somehow—I don't believe it."

"I expected that. But listen. I found Narcisa's letter and what she enclosed with it in his cabin, on this gallant ship. He had left it behind, and here it is. Of course, I might have forged the letter. But I assure you I did not. I'm a rotten forger, Miss Clare, I am indeed."

Clare read the letter slowly and then glanced at the newspaper advertisement which, an eternity before, it seemed, her mother had shown her in the little bedroom of Mrs. Badger in Battersea. She sat down, still holding it. So Narcisa had known. The man whom she had seen on the sea-front at Manila with her, the man before her, was not lying now. As he said, it was the crash. Henry Marlowe was very clever, but he had not been able to guess that there was a shadow on his trail from the very beginning. Or perhaps he had forgotten it. Outwardly, Clare showed no emotion.

"Who honours me with this"—she paused—"kidnapping, isn't it? Mr. Gerald Sleath?"

"It is Sleath, of course, Miss Clare. He is a tough customer, but a gentleman. I think he must have been educated at both Oxford and Cambridge, not to speak of those other colleges—Eton and Harrow. But in the Islands we take the gloves off when we fight. If possible, we even put on knuckle-dusters. But, joking apart, he is very sore with you. He has not the admiration I have for one who can carry through such an adventure and almost get away with it. You see, he looked upon the Gorgon's head long ago and is now Portland cement, at least."

"Is he fearfully angry?" Clare shot Lorenquo a feminine glance through half-closed lids. It was done before she knew it. At a moment's notice she had begun the game of pretence which was forming in her mind.

"Sleath is never angry. He turns into an iceberg. He is a tremendous gentleman. No, he is not angry. But he thinks it right to take you back and confront you with Marlowe, who, he believes, poisoned the Rajah."

"Did Alan tell him to take me back?"

Lorenquo coughed. He was on delicate ground. The dear little girl must have loved Cousin Alan a little. Naturally. Women were very adaptable. But a pang of jealousy went through Lorenquo.

"Not exactly. Sleath does not love Cousin Alan, as you may have observed. He believes he has been unjustly kept out of his rights by him. Ah, throw in, Miss Clare, about Alan! Forget it. He's forgotten you."

"Yes. . . . You say you want to help me. I wonder if you can? I'm horribly frightened of Gerald Sleath, Mr. Lorenquo. I don't mind confessing it."

"He shall not hurt a golden hair of your head!" said Lorenquo passionately. "Not if you trust in me."

"I shall have to," sighed Clare.

She pressed her palms against the bulkhead behind her as he took a step nearer, but Cæsar Lorenquo, in his novel and new-found white man's love, did not touch her, save to raise her hand and pass his lips across it. That much was allowed. The Spaniards did it, and he was half a Spaniard.

"Now come. You are a guest. Sleath is a gentleman—not more

than I am, though I let him pretend he is. You are among fine and gallant gentlemen, I assure you, Miss Clare."

It was all for Alan, Clare told herself with an artificial calm, as she followed. What became of herself she hardly need care now, since everything was destroyed that she cared for and the time of reaping had come. If Alan had chosen Narcisa, it was what any other man would have done. Perhaps it was to give her a chance to get back to England without ever seeing her again. He might be generous that way. But, before that could happen, she had to do two things: find out what real purpose lay behind Gerald Sleath's handsome mask, and face Henry Marlowe for the last time. . . .

With such hopeless thoughts, Cæsar Lorenquo's hand resting on her arm, Clare went into the big cabin. Sleath was already there.

"Ah, Mrs. Trenchard! Welcome. Though this is unexpected."

Gerald Sleath came to his feet. He made a slight bow, his face, without any expression save a lifted eyebrow of faint surprise.

"I've surrendered, Mr. Sleath," Clare said. "I know when I'm beaten, I hope."

Sleath's glance ran over her. He laid down the cigar he was smoking, and then:

"It's a great gift, Mrs. Trenchard. I should say you've had a good run for your money. I wondered when you would come a cropper and thought it would be before now. It's long since I was in England, but I imagine that, to judge by you, it's a sporting generation."

"Thanks," she replied, with a rueful smile. "It's usually supposed to be. I suppose I can even find it in me to forgive you the rough time you gave me last time we met. It was rather startling for a girl just newly out from home. It must have frightened me for good, I think."

"All in the game, Mrs. Trenchard," returned Sleath lightly. "We'll all breakfast together, if you'll honour us. It's late, I'm afraid."

It was Sam Dak who waited on them at breakfast, Lorenquo who sat with his eyes as limpid as a doe's by her side, Gerald Sleath who was opposite, yet she ate hungrily, flexed to something far beyond herself. She prayed that she might not over-act, that some power would show her the way to seem the discovered, but by no means dejected, adventuress she pretended to be. Lorenquo was easy. He was infatuated. But Gerald Sleath's eyeglass seemed to laugh and mock. . . .

"Honey, Mrs. Trenchard? Not from Hymettus, but made by the bees of Ten Peacocks, I believe."

"Thanks. I've tasted it before, you know."

"With the moon," murmured Lorenquo. "That romantic orb. Miss Clare—she gives me permission to call her that—wishes to know what her ultimate destiny is, Sleath, if you've thought it over. I'm sure she does."

"She doesn't seem particularly anxious, Cæsar," Sleath smiled across the table. "I really don't think she's worrying much."

"I am indeed. You're not going to deport me or hand me over to the Dutchmen, or anything like that?"

Clare made a mouth of dismay and appeal. In the mirror across the room she could see that it was charmingly and impudently done.

But she felt her lips slowly grow dry as she turned her glance to Gerald Sleath. He answered:

"It's not easy to decide what to do with you, young lady. There are so many alternatives, in these colourful seas. When a wrongdoer is caught it's sometimes more convenient to set up one's own court of law. Mr. Justice Me, you know."

Whimsically, Gerald Sleath's smile came across the table; whimsically, but coldly dead and deliberate. Clare, under the pretence she had put on, pouted thoughtfully. She shrugged.

"He seems very powerful out here, I must say. He doesn't always temper his judgments with mercy, does he?"

"Occasionally. But it's not always wise to, dear lady. In this case, Mr. Justice Me has a rather unusual prisoner before him. Unusual, because of her sex and undoubted charm. But it is usually the jury who fall for that. Not the judge."

"So that's no use!" sighed Clare. She put her hand beneath the table, because, try as she would, it was hard not to let it show her tension and fear. "Is it any use throwing myself on the mercy of the court and confessing that I'm what the novels call an adventuress, who's grown a bit sick of adventure and wants to go home?"

"And leave your husband for good, Mrs. Trenchard? Because you're still my Cousin Alan's legal wife, you know. Is that in it?"

"He's finished with me, I expect, now that he knows. Besides, I'm not sure that I ever really loved Alan. I'm rather a butterfly, I'm afraid."

That was for Lorenquo. Sleath was a corpse where any feminine allure was concerned. All that she could do was to make him believe that she was the super gold-digger who had come coolly across half a hemisphere for her booty, had failed, and now meant to swagger back home—unless some further adventure intercepted her. . . .

"You could get a thundering big alimony out of him," suggested Sleath, smiling. "Alimony isn't to be sneezed at, you know."

"I don't want it. I'm fed up with the East—anyway, the uncivilized part of it. Shanghai or Honolulu might not be bad for a bit. You've no idea how I long to hear a saxophone. I should have loved Manila—if only you'd have let me stop there, Mr. Sleath." Clare's eyes were big and reproachful. "The dancing at the Escorial was marvellous. Don't you think so, Mr. Lorenquo?"

"Marvellous," agreed Caesar Lorenquo.

"Will you plead with Mr. Sleath to put me out of my misery, Mr. Lorenquo?" asked Clare, in mock desperation.

"Some misery!" murmured Lorenquo, as he leaned over to put a match to the unlighted cigarette between Clare's lips.

Gerald Sleath had already lit his. He blew a gentle cloud to the ceiling of the cabin.

"You don't seem particularly anxious about your husband's fate, Mrs. Trenchard," he said lazily. "Caesar has told you, I expect, that Cousin Alan has stayed behind in Manila with Narcisa del Agramonte. But Caesar may be a notorious liar, for all you know. How do you know something much more unpleasant has not happened to him? He may be dead."

"You mean you have—you might have—killed him?"

"I might have. He certainly would have killed me if he had had the chance. *Quid pro quo*, you know."

The cigarette between Clare's fingers was crushed flat as she averted her face. This was like playing poker in the darkness with a tiger or some other nocturnal animal. The brain behind that handsome and gentle face was too far-seeing. It might be true, what he said. Gerald Sleath could kill, and there was some far deeper reason for what had happened on the *Maraquita* than Lorenquo had said, if she could only find out . . . Yet, again, he might only be testing her, to see if her devotion to Alan was more than that of the butterfly she had called herself. His purpose might be to probe beneath her pretence; it might be anything. Clare found herself speaking almost lightly.

"I hope you haven't. I hate—that sort of thing, though it seems the fashion out here. I've seen quite enough of it. And Alan isn't a bad sort, you know."

"And then," went on Gerald Sleath, resting his arms thoughtfully upon the table, "there's your—well, shall I call him your foster-parent, now? Marlowe. There goes a rotten egg for you. I put it to you, Mrs. Trenchard—if you will pardon the judge taking on the role of the prosecuting counsel for the moment—that it was part of your and Marlowe's plan to do away with Rajah David from the beginning."

Clare shook her head. She tried suddenly to think of Sleath's face as a mask with nothing behind it. That might make it easier.

"It wasn't mine. I don't believe it was his, either. I believe it was that Chinese woman. Lula Ling did it of her own accord, I think, if Rajah David was really poisoned."

"The Dutch police commissioner won't agree to that, I'm afraid, Mrs. Trenchard," said Sleath drily.

"They'll hang both me and Henry Marlowe, you mean?" asked Clare, with a shaking laugh.

"Oh, rot!" protested Cæsar Lorenquo. "He's pulling your—er—he's just jollying you, Miss Clare. He doesn't mean to let you go through the fiery ordeal of a trial by a lot of bally Dutchmen, I assure you, even if there was ever sufficient evidence. Sleath's not that sort."

"The jury has already acquitted you, Mrs. Trenchard, you will perceive," said Sleath, rising.

"What about the judge?" demanded Clare, rising, too.

Sleath paused in the cabin doorway. He had the aspect of a man who had been amused, but was now growing bored.

"His decision will be promulgated in due course. In the meantime, the prisoner is on parole."

Clare, looking after him, was aware that in every respect she had failed miserably. He knew that she loved Alan, knew that she was ready to give her life for him, and that, if Alan were dead, the most desperate action was not beyond her; she who had once been Clare Gray, and was now Clare Trenchard, of the Islands.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THUNDERBOLTS A-PLenty

CÆSAR looked over the starboard bow at Seiqueira Kalu, as the island, with its scattered lights, rose slowly out of the purple velvet

of the sea. It was a dreamy sight, to one who pictured himself living there as the vizier of a white rajah, before long.

There came a little rustle by his side, as he stood by the rail. It sent a sheer shiver right through him. Clare was beside him, bareheaded, bare-armed, with a dark cloak flung over her gossamer frock and her head bent to watch the phosphorescent water.

"I think you must be an artist, Mr. Lorenquo, or else a poet, to stand looking so thoughtfully at those stars."

"Do you think so, Miss Clare? They remind me of your eyes. Ah, pardon me!"

Clare stepped back.

"You're—you're too swift. I haven't known you very long, you know. . . . Oh, listen, Mr. Lorenquo. When the *Maraquita* comes to anchor, I want to get ashore. I must. Will you help me?"

"Phew! To get away?" Cæsar inquired, with eyes as round as those of a rabbit.

"Only to see Henry Marlowe and give him a piece of my mind for letting down the whole show. It was beastly of him about the Rajah."

Cæsar Lorenquo threw back his head and laughed softly. The irresponsible little goddess! What next?

"If you like to come"—Clare averted her face shyly—"I should be delighted for you to look after me. We've been good friends, haven't we? You've been more sociable than Mr. Sleath."

Cæsar, beneath his heavy wave of intoxication, cogitated quickly. The *Maraquita* was drawing at half-speed into Kalu Harbour now and, by the edge of the lagoon, a small, red-funnelled steamer was anchored. He recognized it as the Dutch police-commissioner's boat from Batavia. Sleath, he guessed, would embark in the launch for it, immediately. What would happen if he took the little white-and-gold digger ashore during Sleath's absence?

She would probably come back obediently, ready for another adventure with him. If she stopped to face the Dutch police with Marlowe for any reason, well he would rescue her. That was always the last adventure before the final close-up in the talkies. . . .

"I'll do it, Miss Clare, for you, remember. Only for you. Just ashore and then back again."

* * * * *

As she stepped softly from the ladder into the small boat, an hour later, the glimmering white sides of the *Maraquita*, stretching up above, were like some ghostly spectre that had carried her far and now was giving her up reluctantly.

"We must move quietly," said Lorenquo, dipping the oars without noise. "A cat is a deaf and blind asylum compared with that creepy-crawly Sam Dak. Do you like him?"

"Not much. But don't talk."

It was all like a dream, to come back to Seiqueira Kalu like this thought Clare, with a kind of frozen calm. Convoyed by Lorenquo and without her husband, the young Raneë returned stealthily by night. The beat of the surf on the reef, the scent of vanillas from the shore, the glimmering pile of Rajah David's mansion—unlit now—the calm mirror of the lagoon, all seemed unreal. . . . Was Alan growing to love Narcisa del Agramonte by this time, or was that all a tissue of lies with only two terrible truths in it: that he knew she

was a fraud and that Henry Marlowe, her confederate, had poisoned Rajah David?

"This boat pulls confoundedly heavy," murmured Cæsar, "unless my muscles are flabby. And—hullo, are your feet wet?"

"Very"—Clare glanced down—"We're taking water quite fast. Did you know?"

Lorenquo shipped his oars and knelt down, groping. When he lifted his face, the starlight showed it more clearly than before, for it had turned from dark brown to yellow, and the eyes were large white almonds.

"The spigot's gone. The bung. The—the cork," he stammered. "It's been taken out, and we're scuttled. My God!"

Clare was not sure afterwards, if she did not laugh out of very fatalism. Lorenquo had twisted in his seat to measure the distance between shore and yacht, and Dutch police-boat. She spoke to him.

"It's Mr. Sleath's joke, isn't it?"

"Sleath or else in Dak. And he's Sleath's bottle-imp. I might have known. They're both damnable humorists."

The click of Lorenquo's teeth was audible. He stood to his feet, leaned on the thwarts, and watched the gurgling water that filled the little boat. The sight of his paralysis as he sagged there made Clare laugh sharply and bend over. She said:

"It's a taste of the medicine you gave Alan and me at Ten Peacocks, Mr. Lorenquo. Do you remember Johnny Shark in the lagoon? I'm nearly glad it's happened. Poor Mr. Lorenquo! I've been fooling you and so has Mr. Gerald Sleath too, apparently."

"Does your friend Johnny Shark live round here?"

"Thousands!" whispered Lorenquo, thickly, and, putting his hand to his mouth, sent a trembling shout across the still water.

The boat sank slowly under them into the luminous sea as he did so. Clare had time to throw off her coat and skirt and take up one of the oars. The water was tepid and sweet as she struck out shorewards, with the star-reflections shaking about her as though she had fallen into the sky. She had always been a powerful swimmer, and there was a silver cup that mumsie had been proud of. . . . Clare thought it strange she should think of that little trophy at that moment.

A glitter like the glitter of Sleath's eyeglass broke the water near to her, and she beat with the oar. There came a gurgling shout from Lorenquo which made her turn her face away for a moment, thinking the sharks had got him. But he was calling to a launch which had left the side of the little Dutch steamer. Gerald Sleath must have meant it only for one of his steely jokes, after all, to warn his amorous lieutenant. Clare forgot the sharks and shuddered at Sleath. And then an iron resolution came to her. She must not let the Dutchman pick her up. She must reach the shore, and face Henry Marlowe first.

Twice the glitter broke the surface again, and twice she beat it away with her oar. The lagoon was within distance now. She was almost upon it when something harsh scraped her foot, sending a cold thrill all through her. She saw the white belly a yard away and threshed at it. Suddenly, and apart from bodily terror, she desired to live as she had never desired before. It gave her strength

to shoot out of the swell into the lagoon. With the calmer waters about her, she knew with some instinct that her desire was answered, though the glittering ripple which was so like Gerald Sleath's eye-glass, with his penetrating smile behind it, still followed.

Just then, at the palm-shadowed lagoon-landing, the private landing of Rajah David, the throb of an engine, suddenly started, beat through the water to Clare's ears. Somebody had seen her. A hail came.

"Here!" she called, feeling, all at once, sick and faint.

The pale hull slid above her, and a flare dropped into the water near her unwelcome follower, lighting everything with an unsteady flicker. An odd mingling of relief and repulsion came as she heard Henry Marlowe's voice.

"Great heavens! You, Clare!"

Wet and shivering, Clare disengaged herself from the arms which had lifted her into the cockpit, and sat down.

"I was coming out to the *Maraquita* now. What has happened? Where's Alan? Can't you answer, girl?"

"I can answer. Alan's in Manila, and a lot of things have happened. You'd better not go out to the *Maraquita*, because Gerald Sleath is there. We'll go back to the house, to talk, I think."

* * * * *

"Are you on parole?" asked Clare.

She had come slowly into the room where Henry Marlowe sat waiting for her beneath the bronze Dyak lamps; a straight and slender woman in a Shantung suit, grave-lipped, hard-eyed, her shining hair still wet. In the doorway, she had paused before Henry Marlowe was aware of her presence, and watched the white hair and aquiline face, burned by the sun to walnut; thin, lean, alert features and shapely head. His chin was resting thoughtfully in his hands. It came up quickly at the question.

"What do you mean, Clare?" Marlowe stood up frowning. "This is all such an amazing business that it makes my brain spin. Sit down. There's a heap of questions to ask."

"There is," agreed Clare. "How do you stand with the Dutch police? I should like to know that first."

Clare sat down, and lit a cigarette. In the boudoir, which had been made ready for the new Ranee of Kalu, she had bathed and changed her wet clothes without any hurry. The room glowed with beauty, but she had scarce glanced at it. Instead, she had stood before the mirror a little while, and then slowly slipped off Alan's wedding ring and the ring with a small, but exquisite, blue diamond which Rajah David had given her. It left her hand oddly bare and she felt the place ought to be covered with something. At the very bottom of the trinket-box she had brought from home was a little gold snake-ring, which mumsie had given her years before. Clare recalled it then. It had lain there for a long time, and she had never worn it. Now, with a sad feeling that she needed some sort of mascot, she had put it on her bare finger before going downstairs.

Henry Marlowe answered her.

"You've evidently heard something. Rajah David died—you know that?—and the Dutch doctor suspected poison. That Chinese woman, Lula Ling, decamped immediately afterwards, and the police

discovered aconite in a drinking-cup she kept for him. Of course, they haven't found her. But Clare——"

Clare looked up, and interrupted him.

"Somebody paid her to do it, I suppose, who would have made sure that she got clear away—naturally."

"I believe those fool Dutchmen thought I had a finger in the pie"—Marlowe broke off—"Clare, can't my story wait? You come ashore at the end of your honeymoon from a shark-infested lagoon, without your husband, to cross-examine me before giving a word of explanation——"

"Please remember that I'm Rajah Alan's wife, and mistress here till Alan comes," answered Clare, with a cold glance. "I should have grown to love Rajah David," she finished, "and now I want to know who paid Lula Ling to poison him. I came ashore to learn that."

"God! You talk as though I was the guilty party! This is a touching meeting between father and daughter, Clare."

There was a silence. In spite of her icy self-composure, Clare experienced a strange thought. What if Henry Marlowe had been in reality her father? Would her attitude have been any different?

"That's a stale joke, about father and daughter. Don't use it again. I want you to listen. Alan knows everything about the trick we played on him and Rajah David—absolutely everything. He learned about it in Manila. I didn't tell him. I was too great a coward, and too—too happy"—Clare smiled bitterly. "It was a woman who knew him, and knew Gerald Sleath and that man Lorenquo, too. They were in Manila when we arrived."

"Sleath was there?"

"Oh, be quiet. Didn't you hear me say so? There's worse to come. Alan had no chance to disbelieve. He saw the newspaper cutting of your advertisement, and Rajah David had been poisoned. He went ashore and never came back to the *Maraquita*. He stayed with Narcisa del Agramonte. At least, Lorenquo says he did, though"—Clare passed her hand across her forehead—"I'm not sure. But the game's up as far as we're concerned."

"Who brought you here?"

"Gerald Sleath. He made me a prisoner in the cabin and didn't let me out until we were well away from Manila. He was bringing me here in order to accuse us both before the police commissioner."

"Accuse us of what?"

"Of plotting to poison Rajah David," answered Clare, in a steady voice. "And the case is very black against us, unless one or other of us can produce proof of innocence—or of the other's guilt. You can see that, can't you?"

While Clare spoke, Henry Marlowe's features remained immobile as if carved out of bronze. They turned eagle-like and thin. His questions were mechanical. For one moment, he made a figure of defeat as he sat there—a gambler who saw all his winnings raked in by his opponents. It was a blow beneath which any man might have staggered and Henry Marlowe was not invulnerable.

Slowly, the blood ran back beneath his skin again. He said, almost musingly:

"Checkmate, Clare, eh? A crashing one, too. Sleath turns himself into an instrument of justice and brings you a prisoner back

to Kalu! He must be pretty sure of his ground. Do you know what I think has happened? I think he must have had Alan, as they say, bumped off good and well this time."

"In that case, Mr. Marlowe, as I should be his widow and mistress of Kalu, don't you think you might speak about the matter with a little more formal sympathy? I don't wish to remind you that you are mine and Alan's guest here until such time as the police arrest you, or both of us. But, you would be wiser to remember it."

Henry Marlowe stood looking curiously at her. Slowly, he had begun to realize that this was a new, a reborn Clare—Alan Trenchard's wife, or widow. Some of his own iron strength seemed to have passed into her. In that emergency, she was safer as a friend than an enemy. He was aware of a reluctant admiration for her.

"Clare, we're both in a tight corner. You see that?"

"Very clearly."

Henry Marlowe lifted her hand. She kept it still but could not pull it away. He frowned.

"What, no wedding ring?"

"I've put it off. Please go on. Say what you were going to."

But Henry Marlowe was staring closely at the snake-ring on Clare's finger. After a long time, he raised a startled, but masked face.

"Who gave you that ring?"

"My mother. What does it matter? I'm waiting for you to suggest, to say something——"

Marlowe drew a deep breath and let her hand fall again. Without speaking, he moved away to the curtained window and looked out. Such things did not happen, even to adventurers like himself, though many strange things had happened in his career. Yet he had had that ring made by a Javanese goldsmith in Batavia, and given it to his wife Amabel, on their Eastern honeymoon, more than twenty-three years before . . .

"What do you know about this ring?"

The question came by his side where Clare stood, holding on to the curtain. Her eyes were wide, her lips parted. She held his arm and beat the question at him. All the house seemed to turn to silence, waiting for the answer.

There came the sound of steps on the verandah outside the window, and the glint of a linen uniform under the hanging lamps.

"Here come Sleath and the police commissioner, I think," said Henry Marlowe.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

BEHIND THE CURTAIN

THE littered quays of Manila, sun-scorched by day and swept by chill winds at night, haunted by vermin, human and animal.

It is a simple underworld, that which infests the water-front of the Philippine capital, and its god is chandu. There are lesser gods worshipped by that curiously mixed scum; fallen white men, brown men, yellow men, black men. More deadly gods, which only the East knows about. Sometimes a white man finds one to worship, and is doomed.

One white man, who, to all appearances, had found some such god,

stood in the moonlight by the yellow water, and shivered beneath his thin, ragged clothing. He looked with blank eyes over the river, closely watched by a Chinese boy who sat on the towering poop of a rice-junk from Hai-Nan and threw a few scraps of garbage down at him.

The man who had been Alan Trenchard moved away into the shadows. He was conscious of no humiliation. He was an automaton with a past that stopped like a blank wall at a Chinese woman on a staircase, smoking and screaming. . . . Beyond that, there was no remembrance, for Lula Ling's drug lay like a heavy lid which closed his brain. Only Lula Ling's vitriol had failed in its first object and accomplished another, grim and unexpected. But even of that, the tall young man with a five days' beard, clad in the tattered clothes of a dock-rat, pale with sickness and emaciated by lack of food, knew nothing.

The delirium had gone long ago, and with it the ravaging thirst. A few cents, earned now and then by manual labour, had kept him from starvation, and once a drunken American sailor had thrown him a dollar. In the quiet night, he knew that he lay in some sort of bondage; that his present life was not a matter of nightmare years as it seemed, but of mere days. But, with daylight came only the animal desires again; food, drink, sunlight, and one single emotion which never left his drugged brain. Terror of the Chinese woman.

"Hi, you, Johnny! Hop it!"

It was the Chinese watchman of a warehouse. He stepped out of the dark maw of the doorway, with his club swinging, and stared after Trenchard's running figure. He spat on the ground and turned into the shadow again, to speak to a form that crouched by his side, swaying monotonously.

"You catchee English Johnny now if you want. Hop it!"

Ahead, Trenchard slowed down to a walk again, and looked behind him. He saw something sidling along the wall and heard it clatter over a grating. It came gropingly, listening, a bandaged and bent thing with no semblance of the human to it. He ran again, stumbled, regained his feet. There was a long passage between bamboo houses and he shot along it towards the lights and turmoil of some busy street. He had craved to go there, among the lamps and the moving traffic, away from the shadowy quays that held him like a spell, but he had never dared. . . . Now, the Chinese woman was driving him there. It was the only place he could shake her off.

It was one of the busy streets through which he had driven with Clare to the Hotel Escorial, though Trenchard did not know it. He stood bewildered at the kerb, dazed by the moving traffic, and saw the masked and bandaged creature listening like some muffled mole. For one moment, the shutter slipped from his brain and he realized. He remembered and spoke aloud, for the first time, a name.

"Lula Ling!"

A new kind of horror, different from his previous animal fear came upon Trenchard as he realized that the maimed creature, fearfully injured by her own vitriol as she was, must have crawled out of the House of the Winking Blind to search for him and finish her work; as dying jungle brutes stalked their prey to the last breath.

Yet, as the creature, at the sound of its name on his lips came scuttling across the sidewalk, Alan Trenchard stumbled back from

the kerb, into the dazzle of the traffic. The shining radiator of a car swerved from him, an instant too late and he was flung heavily, spun for a moment of hoarse shouting voices and blaring horns, and then dropped with blackness pouring over him.

* * * * *

In a cool patio, between the white walls of her mansion, on the river front at San Miguel, Narcisa sat lightly upon a couch. Her eyes rested thoughtfully on a fountain that bubbled and splashed within its alabaster basin in the middle of the tessellated floor.

"How strange! You can remember nothing, even yet?" she asked the man by her side.

"Nothing. Except that Chinese woman. She's vivid enough, in all conscience."

"You're safe from her now, never fear, *amigo*," said Narcisa, with gentle sympathy in her voice.

Alan Trenchard looked at the golden-skinned face. There was no recognition in his glance, but only a puzzled gratitude.

"I guess I am. But I don't understand yet why you've been so good to me," he said laboriously. "It wasn't even your car that knocked me over. You only chanced to come along when the traffic was held up, didn't you?"

"Only chanced"—Narcisa laughed gently—"I think life is mostly only chance, don't you? But chance may, after all, be some sort of god. I'm a woman, but I'm not entirely inhuman because of that, you know, Alan. I'm calling you by that name because I once knew an Englishman named Alan."

"But—to pick up a guttersnipe like I must have looked. I may be one for all either of us knows. A real eighteen carat dock loafer. No. I don't think I am. It's damned comic. . . . What did that doctor say, *señora*?"

"He said you had been drugged and it was a miracle that your brain was not entirely destroyed. Nobody knows what those brutes of Chinese can do with hemp and aconite. I suppose it took more than one or two doses to achieve its object, and you got away from her in time, before she could finish"—Narcisa shuddered and paused—"The doctor said something else. He said you ought to get away from the East, Alan, if you're to get well again."

"Some hope," said Trenchard wearily. "Did he say which luxury liner would call for me?"

He had no wish to leave the East at that moment. His mind, blacked out in past and future, had come in a short time to fasten greedily upon the present. He wanted to sit at the feet of this kind and lovely woman as long as she would let him.

A soft-footed servant entered, carrying limes and ice, through the vine-hung loggia. He and Narcisa passed out to where a soft sea-wind blew through the trellised arches, and sat for a while looking at the blue sweep of bay and glittering roofs of Manila. All at once, Trenchard frowned and leaned over. Involuntarily, his hand fell upon Narcisa's.

"Why don't you turn me out, now you've done your kindness and nursed me well again?"

"Perhaps I'm lonely. Perhaps I'm eccentric. Rich widows sometimes are. And I dropped my Spanish conventions, long ago, even

in Manila. I've an obstinate streak in me, likewise a vulgar curiosity. Alan. I want to discover who you really are. For that reason, I mean to take you away from the East to my home in California as the doctor prescribed. If I did that, would you—misunderstand?"

"No, I wouldn't misunderstand. But it might not be wise, Narcisa. Wise for me, I mean. I'm dangerous. I've no background to keep me sane. That's my own funeral, I expect. Somewhere something's calling me, urgently"—Trenchard leaned his face on his hands a moment—"I feel it. But while you're kind to me——"

"You sound so dangerous," said Narcisa, rising with a quick laugh.

She felt like writing a letter of thanks to Gerald Sleath, who had so coolly betrayed his promise not to harm Alan, and thus given him to her, with no other woman in his memory. Narcisa del Agramonte, whose blood came from old Granada, found a little wondering pity for a golden-haired stranger girl whose adventure had so pitifully come to nothing. . . .

* * * * *

During those days, when the big black-and-gilt steam yacht which Honolulu and the Golden Gate knew as well as Manila did, was being hurriedly commissioned, the companionship between them deepened swiftly. Trenchard found himself listening for Narcisa's footsteps. Marooned on the island of the present with dark seas on every side, she was his only companion. Perhaps, too, there was something in Lula Ling's drug that weakened the fibres and made of it all the essence of a sweet dream.

More than once, something clamant urged him to leave the mansion where he was a willing prisoner. But the thought of those nightmare docks where he had roamed like a pariah, always made him recoil.

There was the element of a conspiracy about their embarkation. It was like an elopement to sit in the big launch together, and move over the purple water to the lights of the yacht, where it waited for no purpose but to take them aboard. Trenchard felt himself caught in some silken web from which he had no desire to escape, and Narcisa sat with a little jewel at her throat that trembled from her quick breathing. On the landing-ladder, she slipped, and he caught her. She did it purposely. It was like some coquettish servant-girl, Narcisa told herself, recklessly, but she wanted to feel his clean strength about her, and find whether he would hold her close for a moment. He did.

Slowly, she went up to the deck.

"Alan!"

He stood by the rail and she knew that, when he turned, he must take her in his arms. Yet, when he did turn, she saw that his expression was bewildered, and his eyes wide as they travelled slowly about the yacht.

"Narcisa!"

He stood staring at her. His glance left her and went along the smooth deck to the shivering reflections of the harbour.

"I've been aboard here before. Or some boat like it. Wait a minute . . . you're Narcisa del Agramonte, aren't you?"

"So I believe, Alan," a very low answer. It was too late. The god Chance had struck again. She could only wait now.

"This isn't the *Maraquita*? Of course not. Clare was aboard her. Sam Dak hit me with a knife-hilt after——"

The shutter had flown open, full, the dark seas had gone, leaving pitiless, bleak light.

"Wait a moment, Narcisa. . . . You've been very kind . . . be a bit kinder for a moment and let me think. . . ."

He turned to the rail and looked into the dark water. The blow was worse than Sam Dak's, but it left him with a clear, bitter vision, and no physical pain. Clare! Trenchard saw her golden head for a moment, and gripped the rail helplessly. She was worthless—a fraud. He took that laboriously. She and Marlowe had laid an elaborate booby-trap for him and Rajah David, who had paid forfeit with his life for being a simple and credulous old fellow. No use going further than that, just now. He was sane again. Deadly sane.

"How long is it since, Narcisa, please?"

"Ten days since I found you. The *Maraquita* sailed a week before that. I never told you. You wouldn't have understood."

There was silence, then:

"You've been my only friend. A trump!" He took both her hands. "I've a pile of enemies to wipe up on Kalu now, Narcisa, unless Clare and Marlowe have cleared out." The names came from his lips without visible emotion. "It was a man named Sleath who handed me over to Lula Ling, I imagine. I'll do Clare the justice of believing she wasn't in that. They're running separate concerns. I've a mission in life now, Narcisa. I'm going to checkmate both."

"And me?" murmured Narcisa. She had crept close to him and, looking down at her, her face seemed fierce and drawn. Her hands went up to his shoulders.

"I knew this would come. But not so soon. I thought we should have been too far away. I didn't think of Kalu, or of Rajah David, or even of Clare. I only thought how much I was your dear friend. What happens now, Alan? Do you send me on my way to California with a wave of your hand? Or do I help you?"

"Do you mean you would help me, Narcisa?"

"I would, indeed." There was a touch of wistful irony that he should ask the question.

"There may be danger. Don't forget that. It'll be a hunting expedition on the Islands."

"I've passed through every danger possible, Alan. I was once married to Ramon del Agramonte."

Trenchard spoke in his new, hard tone.

"It's like coming out of chloroform, all this. Sleath, at any rate, thinks I'm a sort of smashed-up cretin walking about Manila docks, or—more likely—floating down the river. I've a plan to teach him otherwise. There's an island near Kalu, Narcisa—Ten Peacocks is its name. I took Clare there once." Deliberately Trenchard lashed himself with the name. "But nobody in Kalu will worry about Ten Peacocks now. There's only Omar, my headman there, and he's as faithful as a hound. Yes, I've got a plan. We'll take hiding on Ten Peacocks and watch the game from there to start with. Your captain can drop us under cover of night, if you're agreeable. But I warn you, Narcisa, there's danger."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE SCENTED BRAZIER

IN Rajah David's house on Seiqueira Kalu five people were gathered under the bronze Dyak lamps of the library.

To an observer they held at once the aspect of an informal party and a court of judicial inquiry, of debonair courtesy and deadly hatred. Van Maas, the Dutch police commissioner, was a large, florid man with a stiff stubble of hair and steel-rimmed glasses, who exhaled a permanent odour of stale cigars. He sat at Rajah David's mahogany desk, under which his thick legs were packed clumsily. By his side stood his Malay inspector, bright-eyed and curly-haired. Henry Marlowe and Clare sat in rattan chairs facing him. Gerald Sleath and Cæsar Lorenquo were a little aside.

Van Maas cleared his throat.

"Perhaps you will state what is the ground of your aggusation laid against Mr. Henry Marlowe, Mr. Gerald Sleath," said the police commissioner, speaking in grave and guttural English.

Sleath's answer came almost carelessly, but promptly.

"I will. I assert that Henry Marlowe came from England to Seiqueira Kalu with a fixed and criminal purpose. I can prove that the woman he brought with him is no relation, though she masqueraded as his daughter. Under a false name she married David Trenchard's son. And on the day they were married, David Trenchard died from poisoning."

"So? That sounds serious. Now you, Mr. Marlowe."

"Highly circumstantial, Sleath," said Henry Marlowe, and shook his head critically. He stood gracefully to his feet to make a little bow to the Dutch commissioner. He spoke:

"On that day also, sir, a Chinese woman named Lula Ling, whom I saw myself hand the drink to Rajah David which poisoned him, disappeared. I suggest that Lula Ling be found and interrogated. You may find then whose agent she was."

Clare, seated by his side, felt Marlowe's hand press hers reassuringly. It brought a momentary horror at the contact, and at his cool audacity, but she fought it back. She ought to spring to her feet and reveal what Lula Ling had told her as she stood with the broken goblet, Clare told herself. But something unaccountable and beyond her will chained her down. She could not do it.

"We try to find Lula Ling, Mr. Marlowe." The Dutch official's glance, phlegmatic but keen behind his glasses, rested upon Marlowe. "We try that very hard, never fear. Do you the aggusation admit that the lady who comes mit you here is not your daughter, though you both say to Rajah David and his son, that it is so?"

"I admit nothing of the kind, sir," Henry Marlowe replied, courteously. "The suggestion is so monstrous as to be laughable."

"Oh!" said Cæsar Lorenquo, in a shocked voice. He looked at his nails and slid a sly, smiling glance across at Clare. Lorenquo's hair was still damp from his immersion, and his manner to Sleath was that of a whipped dog that tries to fawn himself into favour again. Upon Clare, his glance rested as limpid as a deer's.

Henry Marlowe smiled faintly at Gerald Sleath, who, as faintly,

smiled back. They were like two duellists who measured their blades in a silent clash. He shrugged.

"Mr. Sleath, sir, has laid a terrible accusation at my door. And now for mine. I name him for a liar and the greatest scoundrel unchanged in the Islands. I challenge him to produce Alan Trenchard, who, he says, handed over to him my daughter"—Marlowe paused coolly—"My daughter and his wife, to bring from Manila to face this charge. Obviously, we must wait for Alan Trenchard. We shall wait for a long time, for I charge Mr. Sleath with having murdered him in Manila."

"Ach!" The police commissioner frowned. He put down his pen, though he had only traced hieroglyphics on a blotter with it so far. "This is getting too deep. That is a wild statement to make, Mr. Marlowe. We are here to find, if possible it is, who caused the Chinese woman to poison Rajah David. That is our first purpose."

"Yet," Clare said, in a clear voice, "you must have Mr. Trenchard here before you can do that. That's obvious, I think."

"So? Your husband is alive and well in Manila?" The commissioner glinted his glasses paternally at Clare. "It was joost a little quarrel that sent you back with Mr. Sleath, eh? Married life has its little quarrels, more in der beginning than later, when one gets aggustomed to the state, eh?"

"I don't know if he is alive and well. I know nothing about it. I awoke to find myself Mr. Sleath's prisoner on the *Maraquita*. But I demand that inquiries should be made in Manila or that we wait till—he comes."

The Dutchman looked across at her, in obvious perplexity. His thick fingers tapped the desk. This was a family quarrel, and his Government turned its bland and paternal face away from such things, unless they became too bloody. Into the domestic affairs of its sultans and rajahs, white or brown, Batavia seldom pried. That was how the Hollander held his East Indies, between a finger and thumb, gingerly. Rajah David was dead, and a Chinese woman, kicking at the end of a rope, would atone for that. Young Rajah Alan might be dead, in Manila, and that was an affair for the Americans. If so, the man Sleath, who was the young Rajah's cousin, or the young Rajah's widow—it mattered not greatly which—could carry on for her Majesty of the Netherlands.

"*Jah wohl!* That is wisdom, little lady. We will wait for Alan Trenchard to come home. A long while it cannot be. The preliminary inquiry is postponed."

Both Gerald Sleath and Henry Marlowe rose to their feet as the commissioner came sluggishly to his. A smile of amusement played about Sleath's lips, but Henry Marlowe remained gravely courteous, as befitted a host, until Van Maas's broad back passed down the steps of the verandah.

* * * * *

Yet, in the days that followed, Clare's was the masterhand on the Rajah's mansion on Kalu, and fear came to Henry Marlowe.

Clare caught that fear by the throat and looked it in the eyes. With every impulse to run away, she held her ground. Henry Marlowe spoke nothing more about the snake ring which had been her mother's. Neither did Clare. She had the empty feeling of one

on the edge of a precipice, over which, if she took another step, she would pitch.

Yet, inevitably, she took the step.

She came back from the little cable station on Seiqueira Point, late in the afternoon, with a sense of complete fatalism. As she looked at the teak and stone house, where it crouched among its vivid tropical beauty, with the sea wind waving the palm fronds about it, it was strange to picture mumsie in her little cottage garden, thousands of miles away, opening the message she had just dispatched:

Cable me the truth about Henry Marlowe, mother, dear. I must know.

As she entered, Clare took in some change which had come about the mansion during her absence. The windows were heavily shuttered, the stout storm-blinds of the verandah drawn, though it was broad, calm daylight. A copper statue moved in the porch at the sound of her footsteps. It was one of the Malay servants, with a kris at his belt, obviously on guard. Henry Marlowe came out of the hall to greet her.

"Where the devil have you been? Perhaps you want Sleath to get hold of you, Clare?"

One glance at the harsh speaker told Clare that something had happened. Marlowe, his thin mouth tight, was badly shaken.

"You're frightened," Clare said, with the steady look which Marlowe was coming to hate. "Very frightened indeed. What has happened?"

For answer Marlowe showed her something which lay in his palm. It was a tiny dart, made from some black waxlike substance, which was already beginning to melt.

"The Black Scorpion they call it about here," he said slowly. "It leaves a mark on a dead man which can't be distinguished from a scorpion bite. Look at the tip. It's made from a real scorpion sting, hollowed to hold the poison. They're using finesse out of respect for that Dutch commissioner. Sam Dak's blowpipe was the weapon, and it came through the open window. Luckily, I wear a protection."

It shook Henry Marlowe, though he spoke no more about it. Subtly after that, while Clare waited for the reply to her cable, or the return of Alan, or any other turn of the wheel of destiny, vague terror crept about the house. The windows remained heavily shuttered. Henry Marlowe carried a small automatic and gave one to Clare, but she put it away, still with a sense that she was a pawn in a greater game than the one which Henry Marlowe and Gerald Sleath played.

"You're frightened!" she said softly once again next evening. "I don't think your conscience is as tough as you thought it was. Besides you're older than Gerald Sleath. I believe you're not his match. You brought me upon this adventure a few years too late."

Marlowe sent her a sidelong glance.

"We'll do them, Clare, yet. If that Dutch village constable would go, we could get things moving. But he thinks he's done justice. Sleath has the *Maraquita* and we have the mansion. The Hollander considers himself a confounded Solomon."

"And we sit here like prisoners," she said. "Horribly frightened—one of us at least. There are a lot of things about you I don't understand. And more about myself. I don't understand why I

don't ask the Dutch police-commissioner for a safe conduct to Batavia, where I can get a liner back to England."

"And leave me? My God, Clare, you wouldn't?"

It was a frightened man who spoke. Clare gazed at Marlowe's white head with a touch of fascination.

"And take you," she added slowly. "Somehow, I want to take you back. I believe you to be altogether wicked. But I like you. Did you know I liked you? All through this madness you dragged me into. And, even now, though I don't think you would ever have done as much for me, I want to look after you. I'm still Alan's wife, though, if he's alive, he'll never have anything to do with me again. But I'm the Rancee of Kalu till he comes. If I like to order you to leave the island, so that you can do no more mischief, you'll have to go."

"Order Sleath and company off, Clare. That would be the best."

"I'm talking about you at the moment. You come under my dictatorship. Your crime was committed on Kalu."

"Our crime, Clare."

"Yours. You paid Lula Ling to poison Rajah David. She confessed it to me."

She had pictured herself burning with scorn and repugnance when the moment came. But, now it had arrived, she only sat huddled in her chair and watched Marlowe with heavy eyes. Her words made him look up slowly and his mouth opened. But, just then, a barefooted servant entered, bearing the brazier of scented grass which Rajah David had always burned in the house every evening.

When they were alone again it was Marlowe who spoke first, glancing down at his white hands. Not by one quiver did he betray the amazed laughter which ran through him at her accusation. Instead:

"So you know?" he said, speaking softly. "Thanks for your loyalty to me, Clare."

He kept himself impassive, neither defiant nor ashamed. To Marlowe, Sleath's accusation had been a shot in the dark aimed by an enemy. It had barely occurred to him that Sleath himself might be concerned in Rajah David's death. That Clare should be sure of his own guilt tightened a hold on her, which was slipping. And he had pondered more than a little over the incredulous suspicion that had assailed him at the sight of the snake ring on Clare's finger. That mother! Why hadn't he sought her out? He had been too eager to leave England. Henry Marlowe was shaken. But he was not ready to quit the adventure.

Clare came unsteadily to her feet.

"Aren't you sorry? Have you no soul left?" she whispered.

The room, with the thick scent of the brazier spreading slowly through it, choked her. She caught at a chair and all but stumbled, then went blindly to the door, with her head throbbing. She could never stay in any room with Henry Marlowe again, Clare told herself in that moment of incoherent thought.

"Boy just brought message, missie."

It was the same barefooted servant who had carried the brazier in. He came padding across the hall to where Clare stood. Perhaps his grin was just the broad Malay smile, but it swam before Clare

like the mask of a hyena, deceitful, treacherous. Then she saw that the envelope she held was the blue official one of the cable station.

Clare sat down on the broad staircase. Afterwards, she remembered, she smoothed her skirt carefully to do so; looked at the envelope a matter of seconds, shelled it open slowly.

Henry Marlowe is your father, Clare, dearest. He never died. Forgive me and be good to him. Am writing.—Mumsie.

It was bald and simple, comically simple, and no longer than a birthday greeting, that thunderbolt. . . . No, it was no thunderbolt. She knew that, now. She had expected it in that inner Clare who was hidden beneath many folds of the outer Clare. Expected it for days at least.

When Clare's hand turned the handle of the door, the little click it made sounded sharp and disturbing.

She walked to the chair where Henry Marlowe sat. The cablegram was in her hands.

Henry Marlowe sat still. His head was forward on his chest a little. The smoke of the brazier hung in thick scented ribands about the room and in grey swathes over Henry Marlowe's chair. It held a sharp and sickly perfume very different from its usual delicate fragrance.

A voice spoke, soft and liquidly :

"Miss Clare!"

There was time to jump back from the dark face which was all liquid eyes and black hair, because a handkerchief covered the mouth. At the shuttered window of the room stood another figure, and she knew it to be Gerald Sleath. Henry Marlowe leaned a little to one side in his chair like a man who slept, and she saw his pocket weighted with something bulging. Her hand fumbled for an instant, the automatic barked in her fingers as she brought it forth. . . .

It was Sleath she aimed at, with the first cold desire to kill she had ever felt. It missed, and he came like lightning across.

"You little imp!" he said, as though she had been a mischievous child.

Clare sprang behind the chair and fired again at a dark shape which crawled across the snow-leopard skin towards Henry Marlowe—Sam Dak. It stopped and knelt, whining like a dog in pain, before it dragged itself in flight to the open window, where Lorenquo already stood, with the whites of his eyes showing. A third time with the pungent fumes of the brazier biting her senses, the pistol cracked. Outside the door she caught a tumult of alarmed servants, and swayed her way towards it. Sleath, with the mirth of a devil on his face, caught her from behind as she did so, and, using all her young strength, she was fighting to turn in his arms and press the muzzle of her pistol against his heart, with no other thought than that, for Alan and for Henry Marlowe, who was her father, she must kill Gerald Sleath.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

WITHOUT ANY LOOT

CLARE scarcely realized what was happening among the ribands of strongly scented smoke which filled the room from the brazier now.

Everything danced before her vision. Some Eastern genie, made out of the grey-blue fumes, seemed to be laughing at her efforts to wheel in Sleath's arms and press the muzzle of the automatic pistol against him.

But she had succeeded in tearing the handkerchief from his mouth. The closed door of the room broke open at that moment and half a dozen servants entered. Sleath, with his arms over his eyes, reeled back towards the open window and Clare fired at him. She put ferocity into the squeeze of the trigger, but only hit the gibbering genie that flitted all about her. . . .

"The brazier—throw it out!" she managed to say. "Take the *man* out of here."

Rajah David's servants were frightened, but they liked the new Rancee and were as brave and faithful as most Malays. One of them caught her; she opened her eyes to find herself in another room, where the air was clean and the night wind blew, untainted, at the window.

"Bad men all gone, missie. You frighten them. They want do things quickly because police ship down in harbour. You go bang-bang and they vamoose. Hai! All gone!"

She bent over Henry Marlowe, where he lay on the couch in a limp attitude. Her father! Had something within her known all the time? A moment's forlorn smile touched Clare. Everything felt lonelier now, some way, even than it did before.

As she knelt there, touching Marlowe's lips with spirit, there sounded heavy footsteps on the verandah. Clare turned to see Van Maas, the Dutch police-commissioner, with two of his men.

"*Ach*, there shooting had been, eh? My man reports the very teufel of a banging up here. Have you shot him?"

The big, torpid body of the Dutchman lowered itself into a chair. He only glanced at Marlowe then stared at Clare phlegmatically as she shook her head.

"He isn't shot, Mynheer. Gerald Sleath came a few minutes ago. I was shooting at him. But, unfortunately, I missed."

Very simply, while Henry Marlowe stirred a little on the couch, Clare explained what had happened. Van Maas's heavy lips sucked on his cigar, as he listened solemnly.

"So? That was very brave for you to shoot oop those villains like that. It was like the moving-pictures, I declare. Well, well, it is a family quarrel, and family quarrels settle themselves in time, *hein?*"—the Dutchman smiled paternally—"If I you arrest for Mr. Sleath, and Mr. Sleath arrest for you, what der teufel is to become of us all? It is well that I leave here to-morrow. *Ja!* For to Manila I go, to try to find your husband, Mr. Alan Trenchard. Those are the orders from the Government of Batavia. It is tam nuisance, and not much chance. For I believe he must be dead."

"I shall stay here till you—find him. I'm Mr. Trenchard's wife."

* * * *

"You are badly frightened!" Clare said, an hour later, for the third time in two days. "In fact, I don't think I should be going too far in describing you as rather a coward. Have you any idea of throwing in to Gerald Sleath?"

Marlowe answered with a quick, nervous smile.

"You'll have your joke, Clare. I'm shaky yet. I tell you, that

Dutchman leaving us in the lurch, hands us over to Sleath. He must have got at one of the servants to put that stuff in the brazier. He'll get me—us—some way. Clare, we ought to clear out while the going's good. The expedition has failed."

"Without any loot?" inquired Clare, in level tones. "Or with?"

Her hand involuntarily went to mumsie's cable, where she had thrust it away. She had not shown it to him. She never would. Her first purpose had gone for ever, Clare knew that, now. She could watch Henry Marlowe, her father, with complete detachment. There was a problem for the psychologist in it, Clare considered. When he was only a stranger who had been very kind she had felt unconsciously drawn to him, because of the call of their common blood. Now that she knew the truth, she could think only how bitterly he must have injured little mumsie to make her hide from him and pretend that he was dead, for more than twenty years. In the same brief minute, Clare had found and lost her father. . . .

"You put it crudely. But there's loot, sure enough. We'd be fools to go without something," Marlowe said musingly, in answer to her question.

Clare averted her face and tapped the floor with a little shoe.

"You'd rather go than wait for Alan's return?" she asked.

"He's dead, my dear. Why hope? Sleath would see to that. And now that the Dutchman's going——"

"He'll see to us?"

Suddenly Clare felt the East in her nostrils, and Kalu something which belonged to her, the Islands with their beauty and their danger, her home, where her destiny lay.

"No," she said slowly. "I'm staying. I'm Alan's wife, and Rajah David's daughter. I can fight Sleath—till one of us wins. The servants like me, and so do the people on Kalu. They'll help me. I've got a chance. You may go if you wish. But—no loot. If you took anything, I should have you followed and arrested. Please understand that."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

BLACK PEARLS

THE yacht swayed drowsily to the swell, with little creaking noises of anchor-hawse and loose-gear. The lights of Kalu were beginning to prick the dusk. A scent of musk and pomegranates blew from the shore.

"Now that the Dutch cop has moved himself on," remarked Cæsar Lorenquo, breaking the silence, "we can take off the kid gloves, which are very hot in this climate."

"First blood to her!" said Gerald Sleath, in low tones at length. "Sam Dak's, too. Ordinary red stuff. I didn't know he could bleed. His shoulder's smashed."

Lorenquo swallowed a little.

"It wasn't my fault. It was too much caution, Sleath. We were frightened of the Dutchman. You wanted it done quietly, didn't you? But Miss Clare didn't know that, so she fired a pistol at us." Lorenquo gulped a laugh and stepped back at Sleath's look, with his own teeth showing in the dusk. "No more dog-whipping, Sleath. I'm tired of it. You've got jaundice to-night."

"A woman, too! It's so damn funny that it fascinates me."

Sleath walked along the dark deck. Lorenquo watched him. There was something about a fallen angel in some poetry he had read. Sleath was a fallen angel. There were men in the underworld of the Islands who drank, or doped, or kept a brown harem, but Sleath's vice was the dark Sleath that lived within himself. Some day, the half-caste knew, in the mood of self-revelation which had come uneasily to both of them, Sleath would kill him, or he would kill Sleath, or they would each die in the other's stranglehold. . . .

"I'll have a drink. I'm sure it'll refresh me," murmured Caesar Lorenquo, drawing a rather cracked smile.

Caesar Lorenquo sat a considerable time over his glass of Napoleon in the teak-and-silver cabin of the *Maraquita*. He dreamed of a pair of brown eyes and a shining helmet of fair hair.

His musings were interrupted by the soft splash of oars, and the gentle bump of a small boat against the *Maraquita's* sides. Bare feet pattered on the landing-ladder.

In some alarm Caesar reached the deck. He saw that by the side of Gerald Sleath a dark figure in the blue sarong of one of Rajah David's servitors stood.

"An emissary, Caesar."

Sleath drew back his head and laughed very softly. At one stroke his black mood had gone. He looked at Lorenquo with whimsical eyebrows, and handed him a piece of notepaper. In the blaze of stars, it was easy to read:

Will you come up here to-morrow evening, to parley under a strict flag of truce? I have a proposal to make. Bring a bodyguard if you suspect any trick, but I assure you there will be none.—H.M.

Another boat stole to the creamy sides of the *Maraquita* late that night. It came almost invisibly over the translucent water, and the brown and bearded giant which it carried towered against the stars on the deck before the man on watch saw him. He caught at the hilt of the kris which the sailor drew, flung it aside, and threw back his beard in a deep-chested laugh. With hands that were like gorilla's paws he caught the man and shook him till his teeth rattled.

"That for not keeping a better look-out, dog," he said. "Now, take me to your master lest I do a service to Allah and flay you alive."

He stood like a son of Anak, a minute later, in the cabin where Gerald Sleath and Lorenquo sat, touched his beard, and made low, yet not slavish, salaam. His speech was in sonorous Arabic. He addressed it to Gerald Sleath, after one piercing and saturnine look at Lorenquo.

"My name is Omar, master, and my father was Baba, of the sea-Arabs. I was born fifty years ago in the household of Rajah David, and have been his servant since then, until death took him."

"Very interesting," said Sleath. He had turned in his chair to look at the brown face, with its hooked nose and dark eyes, as the full light of the lamps fell upon it. His hand hung negligently in his coat pocket. With Marlowe one never knew. The wound in his own back was still a constant reminder.

Omar smiled faintly.

"Nay, I am no assassin, master. I am Omar of Ten Peacocks, a simple man. Till evil came to Kalu, and a false woman, I was the

young Rajah's headman on that island. But the son of Baba serves under no woman; true or false. Rajah David is dead—poisoned. The young Rajah comes no more to Ten Peacocks, and he, too, says the report, is dead. The hand of the Prophet has struck Kalu hard, since the wicked ones came, and there is only one of the blood left. Omar serves but the blood of Rajah David. I am here, *tuan*. I go back to Ten Peacocks as your servant."

"Ten Peacocks!" It was Lorenquo's hushed voice. "That's where the black pearls are. You remember, Sleath——"

"If I do not choose to make you my servant, Omar?" Sleath twirled his glass. The glacial glance that had silenced Lorenquo went to the headman, who made a little proud and indifferent gesture, and stood beneath the raking look like an emperor.

"There are others, master. Omar is no slave. I am sorry. Forgive me, *Tuan Sleath*."

Sleath tapped the table thoughtfully. His glance ran over the Arab.

"Ten Peacocks? That's my cousin's private island. What's the precious secret, Omar?"

"There is nothing, *tuan*." Omar's bearded face was as expressionless as a blank wall beneath his green headkerchief. He was the impassive Oriental servant. "Black pearls said this —" Omar paused for a split second of insult. "—This *tuan*? His father was colour-blind. There are no black pearls. I bid you farewell, *tuan*."

"Farewell to your master, eh, Omar? Stay here, you rebellious dog!"

He was smiling, but the lash of the white man was in his voice. Omar's mahogany face broke into a flashing grin of relief. He bent and lightly lifted Sleath's foot.

"Hai! My heart was breaking, master. There is no blood but Rajah David's blood for me. Now I go back to Ten Peacocks happy again. But first"—he was grave again. A moment's moisture stood in his eyes. "There is something which I have brought with me. Long ago, the young Rajah told me that, should any ill happen to him I must convey it to Rajah David. But Rajah David is dead. It is but a little box of sandalwood. Will you take it, master?"

The red sandalwood box which Omar took from his tunic was hardly larger than a trinket-case. It was unlocked, but a silver clasp fastened it firmly. There was silence in the gently-lifting cabin while the Englishman opened it, revealing a morocco-bound notebook and a small washleather bag. Sleath took up the latter and poured something out into his palm. A hiss came from Lorenquo. He stiffened.

There were a score of black pearls, iridescent and glowingly alive and shimmering like ebony liquid. Gerald Sleath held a small fortune in his palm. But, with no outward emotion, he placed the gems one by one on the table and took up the notebook to turn over its leaves, and read the jotted notes it contained:

Splendid pearl shell in lagoon. Twenty divers. Women best. . . . Black pearls chiefly. . . . Legend that Suleiman of Ten Peacocks, the last sultan, had a whole pile of loot buried with him. . . . Tried to open Suleiman's Tomb, in mosque. Suspect some hidden chamber. More pearls to-day, but Suleiman knew about the lagoon and got the best. . . . Reached beneath floor of the mosque into underground chamber to-day. A surprise to spring on the old Rajah. Omar alone

knows of these investigations, and thinks I'm dippy. He'll think otherwise. . . .

That was the last entry in Alan Trenchard's neat writing. Gerald Sleath sat for a long time gazing at the white page, and flicking it thoughtfully with his finger. His shapely mouth was thin and tight. He glanced at the sandalwood box, with its faint, sweet odour, and then pushed it absently away. When he looked up the notebook still in his hand, his face was a pale disguise that made Lorenquo stare at him. He asked a negligent question.

"This book lay in the box with the black pearls, Omar? Is that so?"

"Always, master. Since the young Rajah went away with his bride. He left it in the box."

"Can you take me to the mosque of Suleiman?"

"It is easy. But there is nothing there, master, save Suleiman, who for ever drinks the blood he shed, but cannot burst or die, because he is eternally damned."

"I'll quaff a bumper with him." Sleath rose from the table with a faint smile. "You shall lead me there this very night, Omar. We should reach Ten Peacocks before daylight and be back here for lunch. I can't wait. I want to see the mosque of Suleiman."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

SULEIMAN'S COFFIN

THE moon hanging low in the sky, touched the dark peaks of Ten Peacocks, turning them to giant gods that sat and slept. The lagoon, as the motor-launch glided into it, was a steel pool that hid secrets. The white beach was a ghostland.

Gerald Hamilton Sleath, one-time gentleman and bearer of the white man's burden, straightened himself and stepped ashore. He stood behind the giant figure of Omar, and gazed musingly at the dark island. The trap.

Cousin Alan's trap.

When a devil laughs at himself, the laughter is apt to have a devilish sound. Gerald Sleath's mirth was deep within. Yet, he pondered, to be quite fair with himself, some of the joke was on his Cousin Alan, too. Hatching that plot must have given Cousin Alan a headache. He had forgotten only two things; that the marks of a pencil kept their gloss when newly-written, and that a leather-bound book which had lain in a sandalwood box for weeks would smell only of the fragrant wood and lose its new odour of leather and paper. There was no smell of sandalwood about Alan's notebook.

Cousin Alan was alive. His hand had painstakingly written that diary during the past few days. The leather-bound book smelt of leather. The new gloss was on the pencil-notes.

Gerald Sleath lit a cheroot, and its glow illumined his thoughtful mouth. He was not superstitious, but a cold and steady superstition, amounting to spiritual belief had come to him that night. It had followed the jarring shock of discovery. Gerald Sleath held out his steady hand, after he had dropped the match, and looked at it. It had the honour of being the only hand that could kill Alan Trenchard.

C He stood there, a cold fatalist. He knew that, to Gerald Sleath,

it was the game that mattered, not the result. To own Kalu, and be a white rajah, would amuse him for a while. But it would soon pall, just as the amusement of using a half-caste worshipper and a Malay who was more baboon than human was beginning to pall. Trenchard was worthy of his solitary steel, if he was so tough that Lula Ling had failed with him. Gerald Sleath felt the dark joy which came to him at rare moments.

"Shall we move, master? It is not far from dawn."

Though the moonlight still glittered on the beach, the dawn-wind was beginning to stir. Ten Peacocks turned in its sleep. Even in the dark overgrowth where Omar plunged, following a tiny path, there was noise and glimmer. The night-hunting animals were slinking home. There was a faint lemon glow on the single minaret of the mosque which the second Suleiman the Bloody had built, years before, when gin and firearms had not come to turn the little sultans of the Islands into sodden old tyrants.

"Behold the mosque, master. But, I tell you, there is nothing there. This is but an ass's journey."

"Lead on, Omar, my friend. Lions can become asses, now and again."

He could see the Arab's broad shoulders, and the muscular ripple of his shoulder-blades beneath his loose green tunic as he moved ahead. He leapt and struck downwards between them, felt the long blade jar upon the bone, and then hilt itself, with a gush of something warm and unseen that drenched his hand. As Omar reeled on his face, he withdrew, and struck again, twice, with a soft whistle of breath at the double effort, kneeling down in the crackling brake to do it. Omar rolled with his beard pointed to the tree-tops, and Sleath lifted his foot to crush any sound he should make. But the Arab had died silently, with the chatter of the parakeets which had sprung to life about the mosque, his only requiem.

Sleath's movements were deliberate. He rolled the body into the deep grass, wiped his hand on his handkerchief, and flung it away. Standing slim and graceful on the jungle path, he took out his automatic and opened the magazine. It was empty, though he had filled it himself.

"Sly old pickpocket!"

The old fox had lurched against him twice as the swell swung the motor-boat, and had relieved him of the weapon. Sleath sent a quizzical glance at the deep grass as he put in another clip.

He was frozen and immobile again, immediately. His blood was singing with the gamble now, but outwardly, he kept a gambler's face. As he reached the clearing ahead, the mosque, with its liana-covered pillars and crumbling dome, was suddenly flushed warm saffron. It stood knee-deep in mist and jungle, with bright orchids growing over the cracked basins where fountains had once splashed, and its tiled court thick with jungle grass.

Reached beneath door of the mosque into underground chamber.

Sleath's thoughts sardonically repeated the note in the diary as he moved, with the interested glance of the explorer, into the crumbled doorway. Very coolly, he took out an electric torch, and shone it into the bell-like cavern. There was no need for it, for through the window of the niche where Suleiman, the Bloody but Faithful, had saluted the sunrise, the dawn lay in a bar that burned redder

each moment. It showed a pile of rubble, an upturned slab, and what looked like a flight of stone steps. The torch flickered to the opening. Sleath bent over, with his eyes aflame.

"Cousin Alan!" he called, softly. "Are you there?"

"I'll wait up here, Alan," he said, with a laugh.

"No need, Sleath!" spoke a voice by his side.

He spun. The automatic in his pocket jumped, but the very momentum of his movement baffled the aim. A fist cracked into his jaw and he went down. The automatic was snatched from his hand, even as he squeezed the trigger again.

"Get up."

Alan Trenchard stood against the flower-splotched wall. He poised Sleath's pistol in his hand for a moment, and then pitched it far through the doorway into the vivid undergrowth.

"Yours," he said.

A second arc of metal went out into the sunlight.

"Mine. I believe your knife is in Omar's back."

"Correct," said Sleath.

Standing a little apart, both surveyed each other, in the hot pool of sunlight that came through Suleiman's niche. Both were alike in their flaming and almost maniacal eyes, and the darkness of their emotions, which had the effect of leaving them almost bodily naked. Trenchard spoke first. He said almost impassively:

"There's a kind of old bronze chest in the vault there, Sleath. It was the coffin of one of the Suleiman's, I believe, though some descendant took him out long since. Don't laugh. But one or the other of us is going into it, this morning."

The other looked at him curiously. He had never pictured Trenchard with that madness in his eyes. They were red-rimmed and heavy. Could the loss of a woman do that? Gerald Sleath suspected that he must have missed one of life's sensations.

"Alive or dead?" he asked.

Trenchard made no answer. He stood waiting. Sleath laughed.

"You're a sportsman, Cousin Alan, after all. Forgive me, for having the impression that you were a prig. Great minds think alike, it seems."

He sprang for a stranglehold, and almost got it, at the first try. But Trenchard lashed out to meet him and his teeth shook. Neither made a sound as they closed in a wrestler's grip that took them down together in the doorway of the mosque. Sleath's body was like whipcord; Trenchard's all bone and sinew. In the long grass of the courtyard they lay flexed and tensed, two animals perfectly balanced in strength, locked for countable seconds. A black ape, squatting on one of the broken walls of the courtyard, ceased to gibber and watched them solemnly.

Sleath had Trenchard's throat at last. But again, those raining jolts shook him and filled his mouth with blood. They rolled into the mosque again, and the black ape went loping away.

"Down here, Sleath!"

Trenchard had him hammerlocked, and his face changed into the bearded one of Omar, grinning triumphantly. Then they were crashing down the steps into darkness. For a moment, they were apart, each crouching torn and bleeding, in a corner of the stonelined vault which was lighted by a rush candle at the ceiling.

How long they waited in that short truce, neither knew. The fall down the steps had dazed them both, but they sprang simultaneously and met in the middle of the chamber, hand and throat. Sleath's fingers squeezed, but the strength was running out of them. A blow over the heart tore him away, and sent him gasping. . . . He knelt with his head hanging, and his opponent was on him. So they knelt, iron fingers at the throat of each of them, in what each guessed behind their reeling senses, was the last death-grip. Gerald Sleath's head was bent far back, like Omar's in the long grass, and blood like Omar's was stinging his nostrils. His neck was cracking. The damned Arab jigged before his vision. He wondered, with life buzzing its way out of him, whether Omar could drag him, an unbeliever, to some Mohammedan hell. . . .

Then he was free. Free with Trenchard limp in his grip and hanging a dead weight from his hands. A species of delirium seized Gerald Sleath then. Somebody was filling the chamber with ringing laughter, somebody blind with blood and with limbs turned to water. He knew it to be himself, standing by some means upright against the wall, with what seemed a broken neck, but he could not stop. And suddenly, with an insane strength, he picked up Trenchard and croaked :

"Where's Suleiman's coffin, Cousin Alan? Where is it?"

He saw it through a red veil, a deep bronze chest, with the lid open, and dropped Trenchard into it. The body fell limply. The lid clanged down, shaking verdigris flakes.

Unconsciousness must have come upon him, in the middle of the laughter, that started off again. When he came-to, he was lying on the stone floor, stiff with clotted wounds. He glimpsed the black ape's hindquarters at the top of the steps as it again scurried away at the movement he made. The sun in the mosque above, when, with definite weakness and weariness he crawled into it, was white hot and vibrant with insects and humming birds. But the mosque of Suleiman slept in the sun as it had slept in the dawn.

In the undergrowth he found his automatic. He grinned distortedly at it.

"Cleaner this would have been. But he insisted." Then : "I've got him."

A deep shudder passed through him. Some thought made him descend the steps of the tomb again and stare at the bronze chest, with its carved and discoloured peacocks and sculptured lock. He crept up to the sunlight again and found a marshy pool, foetid with animal scents, but cool to the flesh. On his wrist was a watch—smashed. It must be early yet.

He swayed drunkenly to his feet, and through the trees, on a little green rise of ground, surrounded by neat gardens, caught sight of a large bamboo bungalow.

Two Malay servants came laughing and chattering from the bungalow. He crouched behind a plantain till they had passed down to where the lagoon shimmered like a turquoise. Then he saw, out on the low verandah of the bungalow, a woman had come. She stood with a white arm resting on the rail, scanning the distant beach.

It was Narcisa del Agramonte.

CHAPTER TWENTY

OMAR'S BEARD DOESN'T STICK UP

SLEATH continued to watch the figure of Narcisa where she stood upon the flower-embowered verandah. The unexpected sight of Ramon del Agramonte's widow made him suspect for a minute that his brain still wandered in the exhaustion which had followed that terrible struggle in the mosque of Suleiman. But that passed.

Narcisa stirred from her still pose, turned, pulled close the honey-coloured shawl which lay on the white flesh of her shoulders and passed into the house again.

Sleath smiled wearily. Briefly he could guess what had happened on Manila. Trenchard had slipped out of Lula Ling's hands into the much softer ones of Narcisa del Agramonte. That was all that mattered. • Even that didn't matter much with Trenchard safe in Suleiman's bronze coffin. A double widow, if slightly unofficial in one case, thought Sleath, though she did not know it. He felt like a barred-out panther, hiding there and watching. A clock within the bungalow chimed. He remembered that he had an important appointment with Henry Marlowe that evening. . . .

Some way he must get into that bungalow. He must wash and drink and find how the land lay on Ten Peacocks. He guessed that beyond Omar, the dead Arab, in whose beard the ants already built a nest, Trenchard had told no soul about the trap he had laid to catch Gerald Sleath; the trap that had sprung on himself.

The wind was blowing the garden palms with a long dry rustle, hiding any other noise. Beyond the two servants who had gone laughing past him there seemed nobody save the Spanish woman astir. Gerald Sleath moved, half bent, to the verandah and gained it quickly. In the wide open hallway he stood, listening. There was no sound but the heart drumming in his shaken body. At the closed door of the room, from whence came a slight noise, he paused, with his hand on the cool metal of his automatic, and opened it gently.

"Make no sound, señora, if you please," he said in a low voice.

The girl in the chair half rose and sat back again. Her face grew very pale, but she gazed steadily and spoke, after a pause, without a tremor.

"Mr. Gerald Sleath? You look damaged. I guess you've been in the wars."

"I have. You'll oblige me by keeping quite still, Señora Narcisa. It may be obvious to you that my business is fairly urgent. This pistol takes exactly twelve cartridges to the clip."

"Really? You must think I'm tough to kill. Or do you mean to make a shambles of the bungalow by despatching all my staff?"

"If necessary," replied Sleath. "But for a start, if there's any brandy in this room get it for me."

"You're very masterful and not at all polite," murmured Narcisa.

She looked at him gravely, rose and passed across the room with lissom grace, as though the glance of some admirer and not the bloodshot gaze of a very desperate and dangerous man followed her.

"Place it on the table and sit down again."

The velvety brandy sang like ichor through Sleath's veins. He felt the strength pour back into him. He smiled and said:

"I want clothes and a wash, and then two of your servants to carry something down to the beach for me."

"Please consider the house yours, Mr. Sleath," answered Narcisa ironically. "The island, too, unless Alan Trenchard objects."

"Trenchard? Don't you think he might be open to a little mild blackmail? I'll confess that I, for one, was a little taken aback to find a lovely lady installed in Cousin Alan's bungalow on Ten Peacocks so soon after his honeymoon. You'd be surprised at the Puritan streak there is among the Islands, quite apart from the missionaries."

Narcisa's eyes danced.

"I'm sure you're a Puritan, Mr. Sleath," she said carelessly. "An English Watch Committee or a Middle West deacon has nothing on you. Will you take another drink, before you follow me round with your pistol, while I find some of Alan's clothes for you?"

She refilled the slender glass a little mockingly, admirably cool and resigned to the situation. With a little reckless gesture, she offered Sleath the glass, standing so close that he felt her fragrance and saw the flush that ran like a light beneath the skin of her throat. As he took it, Narcisa struck with the hand that glided from beneath her shawl, but he was ready. He jerked aside and the blade went deep into the back of the chair. In an instant he was on his feet and they were locked, struggling for the knife. If Sleath had wished, he could have shot the beautiful creature like a dog. But it was easier to pluck the weapon from her hand and drive a swinging blow at the white temple with the hilt of it.

Sleath looked down. His face was thin and impassive as he listened for a moment. No sound came from the house. Already he had noticed a curtained doorway at the end of the room. Opening it, he saw that it was a woman's chamber, faintly perfumed and furnished daintily. He caught up the unconscious figure and, carrying it inside, laid it on the bed.

There was a dew of sweat on his forehead when he passed out and locked the door. Swift movement came to him. He found Trenchard's room, stripped, washed, changed. A quarter chimed from the clock in the bungalow when he stood before the glass in a suit of yellow pongee, leggings and sun helmet.

"They'll take me for Trenchard at a distance, by Jove!"

It was with a renewed sense of adventure that Gerald Sleath went out into the sunlight again. He was fiercely exhilarated now. Only his body ached and he limped a little till the stiffness wore off. As he walked through the tropical shade, with now and then a glint of blue sea through the leaves and now and then the minaret of the mosque against the blinding light of the sky, he thought of the appointment he had made with Henry Marlowe for that evening. His head went back and he laughed. He meant to keep it faithfully.

Each moment, Gerald Sleath knew, Fate might betray him and drive him in hasty flight to the motor-boat, which was moored in the lagoon. Let Omar's beard stick up a little from the long grass and the whole island would be astir. There was a little pearling *prau* in the lagoon, and its crew were gazing curiously at the strange launch that rode inside it as they glided seawards. Then they caught sight of his figure and were apparently reassured that their master

knew the reason of its presence. Trenchard . . . locked in Suleiman's bronze coffin and dead as Suleiman himself. . . .

He had reached the crumbled outer walls of the mosque and stood knee-deep in grass, staring at the silent stone and the dark doorway, which had the look of a hole in a giant eggshell. He hesitated. There were two Gerald Sleaths within him at that moment. One which told him he had flung his enemy, strangled, into a bronze box with a clasp like a mantrap and could wisely get back to the *Maraquita*; a second, full of dark laughter, which had planned a satiric joke and wished to carry it out.

A glance seawards showed the tawny sail of the pearling *prau* a mile out, heeling round the southerly horn of the bay. There were only two figures on the beach, recognizable as the two servant boys he had seen before. They came running towards the mosque, shouting excitedly as they caught sight of his sun helmet among the trees. Gerald Sleath moved into the shadow of the broken doorway and lurked there.

"Master, are you there? There is a strange boat in the lagoon Assad, of the *prau*, bade us find you and tell you."

"Quiet, fools!" called Sleath from the dimness. "Can a boat not come from Kalu without an uproar? Come in here. I have work for you."

They were simple-witted young giants, barely out of their teens, as he saw quickly. They came timidly into the mosque and gazed with some disquietude at the maw of Suleiman's tomb. Sleath's hand was on his weapon, but the hollow echo which the mosque gave forth helped to take any individuality from his voice.

"There is a bronze chest below there. You will bring it up and carry it down to the motor-boat in the lagoon. Suleiman will not harm you. His spirit is not here. I go down to the boat and wait. But waste no time."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

TYPHOON

DINNER was being served in Rajah David's house on Seiqueira Kalu. The last parakeet had screeched in the jungle outside. Clare, in breeches and tunic, sat at the head of the table, with the lamplight on her hair. At that hour, when the soft and mysterious night of the Islands fell, she liked to think of mumsie at her cottage door in the friendly English sunlight. It made her rest her hand, with mumsie's snake ring on it, upon the table. She saw Henry Marlowe's glance go to it and glide away again.

"It intrigues me—this ring," she said, "or rather your behaviour when you first saw it on, does. Won't you tell me if you've ever seen it before?"

"I thought I recognized it at first. I see now that it's different from the ring I know. Your mother probably bought it at some Eastern bric-a-brac shop in London. What the deuce is this we're eating?"

"Shark's fin," said Clare. "I'm taking my revenge on Johnny Shark. Did that ring belong to your wife—Amabel?"

Marlowe wiped his lips.

"Clare, my dear, you tread a little heavily on old bruises. Yes,

Amabel had a ring not unlike that." He paused, his fingers twirling his glass stem, face downbent. "My dear, I never mentioned it. I shall never mention it again. I worshipped Amabel. But she let another man take her from me. So you understand now why even that ring troubles me."

"I'm sorry!" murmured Clare.

Over her came a sense of suffocation. It was hard to sit there, knowing he was her father, this smooth, unworthy liar. Clare believed Henry Marlowe to be both coward and poisoner. For all that, she wanted desperately to search for some spark of goodness in him, to give him a chance. He knew that snake ring. Since she was so much like her mother, he must be almost certain that she was his daughter. He must know that mumsie had put her deliberately in his path. But he turned his face away from it. . . . Why? With another man, it might have been shame, a resolution that the girl who saw his soiled soul so clearly, should never know she was his daughter. But Clare guessed that his purpose lay much deeper. She sighed and, before she knew it, felt very lonely.

"If I did chance to be your genuine daughter by one of those marvellous chances that might happen once in a million times"—she faltered a little—"it would make rather a difference, especially if Alan were alive, wouldn't it?"

She turned her face, unaccountably blurred, from the table and did not see the cold hatred and defeat that passed like a shadow across Henry Marlowe. He could feel like that when she looked away, though when she looked at him he felt cowed. The slim, wistful girl before him had taken his schemes in her hand and broken them one by one. With Trenchard alive, at the most he would be some old pensioner tolerated so long as he behaved himself. With Trenchard dead, he would be still more under the firm steel of her fingers. Henry Marlowe saw it clearly.

"Tall fancies, I'm afraid, child," he answered, "both of them. We'll not boggle with our conscience that way."

It was useless, thought Clare. For the rest of the meal they were both silent. Clare, when it finished, went up to her room. The long tension was beginning to tell. She was not a super-woman, though when she studied herself in the mirror, with her firm mouth and hard, alert eyes, she almost looked one. How much longer would she remain a voluntary prisoner there, waiting to hear whether Alan was dead or alive, waiting for some attack by Sleath, waiting for she knew not what catastrophe?

She took out the little Browning pistol which Henry Marlowe had given her and, for some occupation, began to clean it under the hanging lamp. As she closed it again, a sound on the steep path of the garden caught her attention. Footsteps were drawing near to the house and there came the shrill challenge of one of the servants, followed by Henry Marlowe's voice. Clare sprang to her feet.

"How dare he? He won't understand that I'm in command." She strode to the door, and then stood frowning at it. It was locked from the outside. For a moment or two of chilly anger and dread, she did not move. When she did so, it was to run quickly towards the window. But, half-way there, she stopped again, and, raising her hand, extinguished the light.

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It left darkness, save for the glow of moonlight behind the curtained window. The footsteps in the garden below had grown nearer and louder. As Clare pulled the curtain gently aside and looked out, she saw that Henry Marlowe stood in the moonlight, with the yellow radiance of the open doorway behind him. From the bushes of the path two men became visible. With an overwhelming sense of treachery, Clare recognized Gerald Sleath and Cæsar Lorenquo.

"Flag of truce, Marlowe, remember!" came Sleath's voice.

"Flag of truce it is," Marlowe answered in a lower key. And then amazement came into his voice—"But what the devil have you got there? Not gifts of gold and frankincense?"

Clare gazed. Two Malay seamen carried something slung upon a sort of trestle, between them. It looked like a long, bronze chest, and, for what seemed no reason at all, she stood rooted to the spot as she watched it pass out of her view on to the verandah. But Sleath stayed behind in the light for an instant, and she saw his live eye flaring as he laughed and gave Marlowe no answer.

There was complete silence for a moment. In the middle of it, Clare wrenched herself out of the evil dream into which she felt herself slipping. She might do two things: blow away the lock of the door with her pistol and go downstairs, to beard Henry Marlowe's deceit, or climb through the window and make good her escape from the house while she had a chance.

She opened the window very gently. There was a broad cornice along which she could walk, and then a tangle of tough bougainvillæa by which she could lower herself to the roof of the verandah. Almost instantaneously, Clare stepped out on to the cornice and was moving on tiptoe along it. As she went, she called herself coward, but Clare knew it was not cowardice that made her wish to escape. It was shame and repulsion at Henry Marlowe who was her father. For the moment, it left her strength for nothing but to run away.

The purple creeper held beneath her weight, and she gained the verandah roof in safety. But, even as Clare crawled along it, to reach the ornamental column by which she could drop into the garden, it became evident that Henry Marlowe had received his visitors on the verandah immediately beneath her. Through a chink which ants had eaten in the cane-matting of the verandah roof, she could see and hear them. It was Sleath who was talking in a hoarse and relaxed voice that differed curiously from his usual cold tones.

"The game's quite finished Marlowe, as I think you're beginning to understand. I've taken a lot of trouble to convince you. I've never staged a conjuring act like this in my life before. But I'm cursed with a sense of humour that'll be my undoing someday. Not yet, though."

"What's in it?"

Henry Marlowe was staring with a fascinated gaze at the carved bronze coffer. Clare too, felt her eyes riveted to it. Ever afterwards she knew, she would remember with a shudder the crushed scent of the flowers she knelt upon.

"I'll show you presently"—even Sleath sat some distance from the chest, and Cæsar Lorenquo was as far away as he could get. "You want an offer from me, you say? Here it is then. After all, this is a family affair, as the Dutch policeman remarked, and Miss Clare is Cousin Alan's widow. Be quiet, man! Do you think I'm

maundering? Caesar here is deeply in love with Alan Trenchard's widow. He would make a very suitable husband for her, I'm sure. That to start with. What do you say?"

"Lorenquo?"—Marlowe's chair creaked. Clare closed her eyes with a last wild hope for what grain of goodness might still lie in Henry Marlowe's immortal soul. She did not see him nod slowly, but heard Sleath's voice again.

"Very good. A marriage is arranged, eh? I shall be content with the title and possessions of rajah. It will amuse me for a little while, perhaps. You will observe, Marlowe, that your daughter, married to a half-caste—pardon me, Caesar. A mere legal term in this instance—ceases to be Ranee. The Dutchmen are down on that sort of thing. Brown sultans or white rajahs they don't mind. But the—er—happy medium—is forbidden."

"You're a born devil," said Henry Marlowe, slowly. "But I agree. I leave it to you to persuade Clare. I shall take a handsome present and clear out. Now, what about Trenchard? Have you proof that he's dead?"

"Complete proof," answered Sleath.

His look glittered to the chest, and Marlowe half rose from his chair. Caesar Lorenquo made the only sound as he gulped his glass empty and knocked it down upon the table. Gerald Sleath stood up.

"If we blew the lock, would the sound bring down Miss Clare?" he asked. "Short of a sledge-hammer, I'm afraid it's the only way."

Clare moved her stiff muscles. Someway, she threw off the cold enchantment which held her there against her will, and when next she knew, she was down from the verandah roof and in the garden, walking blindly down to the lights of Kalu. Escape. That was the only thing. It did not matter where to. But she must leave Rajah David's house, which had become a place of fear, as far as possible behind.

Presently she was running, her breath coming in deep gasps. That lasted until she reached the little water-front and the sound of a ukelele in Joe Sang's cafe reached her ears. There she paused, under a rustling vanilla tree, and looked at the dark beach and scattered lights with eyes that did not see them.

Far beyond Kalu point there was lightning and a rumble of thunder out to sea. The palms about the water-front had turned still. The air had a dry, hot prickle to it. The beat of the surf on the reef was like long, sullen tucks of a drum. Clare found herself standing on the little private quay the Rajah had built for himself. There was a pale unlighted hull moored to it—Alan's own launch.

She wondered, vaguely, whether she could reach Batavia in it. It was not one of the small launches which were the private runabouts and taxi-cabs of the white men of the Islands, but a powerfully-engined forty-footer. From Batavia, she could get a mail-boat to home and little mumsie. Only much later did Clare realize that she was barely sane in that hour to dream such things.

The petrol-gauge showed a full tank. The binnacle-light glowed as she switched it on. It was five hundred miles to Batavia, but she might meet a Dutch mail-boat in the Macassar Straits, or take refuge on some friendly island which knew the name of Rajah David. Anything. But Clare told herself with unnatural calm she could not stay on Kalu.

The first crash of thunder came as she threw off the last mooring rope and the launch throbbed to the opening of the lagoon. But the air remained still and sulphurous. A coppery glow spread behind Kalu. Had Clare known what that portended she might have hesitated, even at that juncture. But, in a minute, she was out on the still, oily sea, with no illumination save the phosphorescent glow of the wake and the twinkle of the binnacle.

Between the thunder crashes, it was very silent, at first. Then, far on the horizon came a low moaning. Kalu died away behind in blackness. Lightning split the whole sky and was swept away in flickering ribbons by a wind that laid the sea flat and white.

It was a typhoon. Clare hung on to the wheel while it caught the launch and seemed to lift it out of the water. She was deafened, drenched and blinded, but, though she thought her last hour had come, she felt hardly frightened. The storm-fiend might sink her, but it was carrying her away from Kalu, she told herself.

The wheel kicked in her hands and she curbed it with stiffened muscles while the typhoon carried her craft between its teeth and stabbed at it with its lightnings. Once, in the glare, she glimpsed the tortured coco palms of some island, but they flashed past. The wind slackened a little, and the sea began to rise.

It ran in great white-flecked mountains. Sometimes the launch was poised on the crest with engines racing, then it was running down a shining slope. Sometimes it flicked over the summits, sometimes it plunged deep and came trembling out of warm, wet blackness. Clare lost count of time in that grim struggle to keep the launch from swerving broadside to the seas, lost consciousness of everything save the wheel she gripped. Someway, in that aching struggle, when it seemed that the next wave must submerge her, she found her courage coming back, and for the first time since she had seen the bronze chest from the verandah, the tightness about her heart slackened, in the face of what seemed certain death. Glancing up for an instant, she saw that over the lightning-shot wall of blackness in the sky the moon was peeping out again upon the wild waste of seas. But a heavy wave crushed down on the coamings as she did so. The big boat shook it slowly from the scuppers and Clare dared not look again.

There came an overwhelming desire to sleep. It took her eyelids and pressed them down. The exhaustion of spirit and body was greater than she knew, and Clare was near to the breaking point. Only the fact that it was placid moonlight again gave her a ray of hope that she might weather that ordeal. She listened. The engine was thrumming steadily in spite of the strain. Alan had been proud of that pale, strong boat—as proud as he had been of the *Maraquita*, their honeymoon yacht. Clare felt her face twist and a sob came from her.

* * * *

It was broad daylight and the sun was high and hot when Clare emerged from a deep sleep of exhaustion.

She came awake in the warm sand and lay watching a red and blue bird in the fronds of the tree above her before memory returned clearly. Ten Peacocks—Alan's Island.

The launch rode in the lagoon, a white glimmer on a purple pool,

beneath the blinding sun. Under the moonlight, Clare had found the opening and shot into it without difficulty. The very force of the storm had thrown the launch in like flotsam. Then, with a craving for dry land, she had crept ashore and lain herself down to sleep.

Slowly, Clare began to walk along the beach path. The bungalow, as she approached it, snuggled as cosily as no doubt her mother's cottage snuggled on the far-away marshes. There was a little smoke from one of the chimneys. It made her catch her breath to see such things. When at length she ascended the steps of the verandah, she was trembling.

"Come inside, please," a voice said.

"You!"

She had all but forgotten the Spanish girl of Manila. Now, as Narcisa del Agramonte stood looking at her with opal eyes, she remembered it all.

"Why are you here?"

"I might ask you the same question. Won't you sit down?"

Clare passed a hand across her eyes. She felt no match for a beautiful woman who was so fresh and fragrant as this one. No wonder Alan had stayed with her in Manila and brought her to Ten Peacocks.

"Oh, listen!" Her control broke for a moment. "They brought—that man Sleath brought—something to Kalu last night. I heard him say——"

"Don't!" said Narcisa del Agramonte sharply. "Do you think I don't know?"

She sat down in a chair. There was a touch of desperation about her. Yet her voice came almost calmly.

"We're in the same boat, Clare Marlowe—if that is your name. There's a monster in these Islands. It has a white skin mostly. I think its other name is Sleath. He came yesterday and he and Alan fought in that old mosque. It was the sort of fight that women only have bad dreams about. Sleath won. . . . He came here afterwards and—knocked me dumb." It was strange to hear the words on Narcisa's lips. "He got two of the boys to carry the chest down to his boat——". She broke off and looked away.

"Let us go outside," said Narcisa, taking Clare by the shoulder. "This house stifles me. I've been here alone all night."

"And I've been out in the typhoon. You can tell by the look of me, can't you?"

It seemed to Clare that Narcisa was on the verge of hysteria, so long as they remained in the shadow of the bungalow. But when they were clear, the Spanish girl turned with a long and curious regard, her colour returning.

"Did you love him?" she asked slowly.

"I was his wife." Clare forced a challenge into her voice, but it failed. "Yes, I loved him. Does it matter to you?"

"A little bit. We needn't pretend. It's strange. It was only an adventure you came upon, wasn't it? He found out that you weren't Clare Marlowe. He told me all about it—of course."

Clare winced. Yet she told herself numbly Alan must have loved Narcisa. In his bitterness, if not before. "On the rebound," people called it. She began to feel a touch of torment at the sight of the girl on Ten Peacocks. Alan's Island. Hers now.

"It chances that I am Clare Marlowe, really and truly. Does that

matter either—to you? I'm Clare Trenchard now, and this place belongs to me."

Narcisa bit her lip. Then she smiled and shook her dark head.

"Not good enough. I loved Alan and he loved me. Do you get that? I think you'd better go away from here. I brought you away from the bungalow to tell you that. It wouldn't have seemed hospitable there, or respectful to his memory. Alan knew how Rajah David died."

Clare drew a deep breath. It was mad, two women standing fighting in the sunshine of Ten Peacocks over the love of a man who was dead.

"He guessed it was—my father?"

"He knew it was you. I said there was no use pretending."

The words came blade-sharp. Narcisa laughed. Yet it sounded somehow pitiful. Then Clare, staring at her without comprehension, saw that she was looking in the direction of the bungalow, at a man who emerged from it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

OPEN SESAME

"WHAT the devil is in the thing, and why all this mumbo-jumbo business?"

The effort on Henry Marlowe's part to keep his manner merely curious was manifest. His glance of careless amusement at the coffer of Suleiman, where it shone dully and inscrutably beneath the hanging lamps of Rajah David's verandah, was only partially successful. There was something ferocious about the calm of Gerald Sleath at that moment which appalled him, for all his toughness. The man made a step towards the unwieldy chest, and then suddenly turned to his lieutenant, Cæsar Lorenquo, with a smile. He sank into a chair. But neither was Sleath's calm quite genuine. A perceptible dew glistened on his handsome, bruised face.

"I'll leave it to you, after all, Cæsar. It's lieutenant's work. Marlowe and I will watch. Work the Open Sesame, Cæsar, my friend."

"What with? There are two old Chinese locks, and they're both like jolly mantraps."

"A pistol, you fool. You permit it, Marlowe?"

"It's your show. Might as well go through with the performance."

Cæsar took the small Colt which Sleath handed to him. The weapon barked twice into each of the two solid locks which clamped down the lid.

"Come close, Marlowe." Sleath's voice was distorted with an odd mingling of triumph and something else it would be hard to describe. "You only need to peep. You're not squeamish? I got him myself. No one helped me. Myself, do you hear?"

The lid of Suleiman's coffin had opened beneath Cæsar's efforts. The half-caste sagged forward. He was staring into it with his fingers at his chin, making a picture of ludicrous bewilderment.

"Go and look, Marlowe, I tell you."

"He'd better not," said Cæsar Lorenquo in hollow tones, "not if he wants to see Cousin Alan. There's nothing doing. He's not here."

"Not there, you damned bat?"

A single giggle of laughter broke from Lorenquo before he bit it off. Sleath had jumped forward from his chair, and Marlowe followed him. There was nothing visible in Suleiman's coffin save several pieces of sacking neatly packed about a litter of stones and rubble, and filled in with dirt and soil.

It was Henry Marlowe who broke a long silence. He said:

"The best-laid schemes of mice and men seem to have ganged a-gley on this occasion, Sleath. It's a confoundedly old trick, too. You'll find it in St. Matthew, I believe. Well, well!"

He turned and, walking back to the table, helped himself with deliberation from the decanter. But the slow movements gave no clue to his thoughts, which were moving like lightning. When he had sent the note to the *Maraquita*, he had believed Alan Trenchard to be as dead as a man could be, somewhere in Manila, and it lay only with him to treat with the enemy and obtain the best terms possible. . . . It came upon him now with an overwhelming certainty that Trenchard must be alive, and the plot of the drama had failed completely. Somewhere, Trenchard, a living man, held the ace in his hands, and might play it at any moment. Henry Marlowe could hardly say when the almost sure belief had gained on him that Amabel was still in the world, and had purposely sent her daughter to him. He hardly worried. It had left him untouched, save disagreeably. He was frightened of Clare. But if Trenchard came back and found there had, after all, been no deception, then he preferred Clare's mercy and generosity to Gerald Sleath's. He thanked God for an agile mind.

"What happened, do you think? That is, if your imagination isn't playing pranks."

"I've no theory. I never was a theorist," answered Sleath. The livid tint was dying away from him slowly. He was beginning to watch Henry Marlowe.

"He got out," said Lorenquo, moistening his lips. "If he was ever put in."

Sleath sent his lieutenant a brilliant and deadly smile.

"I put him in, Cæsar, my friend. I remember distinctly doing so. I'm sure there was no mistake. But, as you remark, he got out."

Henry Marlowe lowered his eyelids.

"You must have taken a fearful amount of trouble. Such an original notion, too, to bring him along here to show me. Hang it, it beats the Count of Monte Cristo hollow. Well, the flag of truce still remains, I suppose. But now there's nothing to shock my daughter, I guess I'd better fetch her down to take part in the discussion."

The stillness of impending storm lay about Rajah David's house. It flickered in the sky and made the rioting garden jump up clear every now and again, with every frond and every petal as still as a painted picture.

Quite likely (Marlowe pondered for a moment) the crack of Lorenquo's pistol had sent Clare to the door of her room, and caused her to discover that it was locked, even if she had not heard Sleath's arrival. It had brought the servants, but he had waved them back. How to explain it to Clare?

"Trenchard alive will be sufficient. Women take the cash in hand and leave the rest."

He was strung up to a calmness he had not felt for days. Flag of truce! Marlowe smiled at the phrase as he trod the wide stairs silently. If Clare took his advice she would capture them both there and then: the hoodwinked tiger and his jackal. There were enough armed servants about the house to make any resistance useless. Their obedience to Clare had become unquestioning. . . .

There was no answer to his knock on the door. He put in the key and gently turned it.

The disarming smile was ready, the half joke, half apology. But, at the sight of the empty room and the open window, his limbs turned heavy. Slowly he looked out. It was black dark, a darkness made out of sulphur, but in the light from the room he saw a sprinkle or two of blossoms which had fallen upon the cornice and knew how she had got away.

"God! Perhaps she heard!"

It made him shrink. It made him cravenly afraid. Fear, which had slept for a brief period, came out of that empty room and put its dead weight on his heart. At first, Henry Marlowe, leaning against the wall, thought it was fear of Clare, fear of some retribution she might take, that his smooth words and plausible explanations could never turn aside. Then he knew that it was because Clare had gone and he was left alone. He who had brought her to the East, meaning in his good time to drop her like an old glove, felt deserted and abandoned to his fate. He put up a hand for a moment, to shut out a vision of a woman's soft brown eyes which he had long forgotten.

After what seemed a long time, Henry Marlowe found himself again, with a deep shudder, and passed out of the room.

It was only dimly lighted on the broad landing. The whole house seemed now to hold a silence that was sinister in the extreme, as every silence must seem to a worthless man or cowardly animal left to fight alone. The air was thick and choking, and each step bathed him in perspiration. Should he, also, leave Rajah David's house behind? The instinct of flight became like a fever, and only by a great effort did he grip it. Sleath, insane but calm and as desperate in failure at that moment as himself, filled the house like a miasma. He dared not return to the verandah. Dared not. . . .

With a moist palm, Marlowe turned the handle of the little room which had been Rajah David's den. It was dark inside there and the latticed window gave a view of the lighted corner of the verandah which he had quitted five minutes before. He meant to sit and watch Sleath for a minute or two, there in the darkness, while he stemmed the ebb tide of his courage. That was all his purpose. But, suddenly, he caught sight of a streak of shining metal that leaned against the chimney corner. It was a heavy calibre sporting rifle which he had placed there to be ready in case of an attack from the *Maraquita* upon Rajah David's house. . . .

Marlowe's hand picked it up softly. The bullets, he remembered, were soft-nosed, and two of them could bring a charging rhinoceros to its knees. Moreover, powerful as it was, Rajah David had had it silenced. The window-sill made a rest for the barrel, the stock fitted snugly to the shoulder, as he crouched in the chair. The thing would kick but not as violently as Sleath and Lorenquo would.

When his eye had travelled down the sights, he saw that the hot moisture of the room had misted the windows, so that, though it did not hide the glow of the verandah, its two occupants were not clearly visible. It made him lower the barrel and take out his handkerchief to clear the glass carefully. Then, again, he snuggled the stock to his shoulder and felt for the trigger.

"No use, Marlowe!" spoke a voice in the darkness by his side.

With something like a scream, Henry Marlowe jumped to his feet and the gun crashed to the floor. He saw, for an instant, the glass of Sleath's eye gleam like a diamond in the glow from the window.

Fear came and strangled him. It was like nothing he had ever experienced before, as though his nerves shrivelled within him under some galvanic current. The door tore open as the other occupant of the room clutched him from behind. He was out on the verandah in a quivering haze of lightning that showed him Lorenquo waiting there.

He drove at the half-caste, who, with a cough, sprawled over. He was poised on the verandah rail, with his flesh creeping at the mark he must make. He had crashed down into the undergrowth and was running through grass that hid him and leaves that cut. Not down to Kalu. That way they would catch him. But into the dark jungle, which stretched up away from Rajah David's house into the very heart of the island.

The lightning was like a volley of searchlights that played now. He cursed it with tight lips because it would show him up. Wheeling, he thought he saw a pursuing figure and redoubled his pace. There was a low moaning sound somewhere and then great blinding blobs of rain. In the lightning, Henry Marlowe looked up and through the trees saw the hilltop where Rajah David lay, looking out upon Kalu. . . .

A kind of frenzy seized him. He must get away from that, as from Sleath, from Clare, from Trenchard; even if he must hide in the middle of the jungle. He squelched deep into a morass and stumbled out of it into a nest of some giant insects. He could feel them over him, but the rain, falling in solid sheets, crashing through the trees overhead like a burst reservoir, washed them off. . . . All manner of pursuing sounds were behind him. That long moaning sound was nearer, and it broke with the howl of devils all about him, bending the trees, sending him flat in the grass for a moment. Typhoon. But that was better than Sleath. . . .

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

LOVERS' MEETING

THE beach of Ten Peacocks with the sweet salt wind blowing over it and the white spray booming softly on the reef, glowed under hot sunshine about Clare and Narcisa del Agramonte. The two girls were the only figures visible by the lagoon shore. But when Narcisa turned to look in the direction of the bungalow, and Clare followed her gaze, a man was to be seen, swinging down the path between the plantains towards them.

"Who is that? Tell me, quickly!"

There was no need to ask. Sleath, with his bronze box, had lied. Narcisa had lied. Everything had lied. Alan was not dead. He stood bolt-still at the sight of her, then began to approach.

"Alan!" She took a step or two, and then stopped at something in his expression. His eyes were those of a stranger as they rested upon her. It made her falter. "Sleath said you were—not alive. He brought a chest to the house on Kalu last night——"

She could only look at him dumbly, without going on any further. And then she looked at the Spanish girl, who stood, with a hand at her hip, pale and silent, and Clare thought she understood.

"It didn't come off, as you see," said Trenchard, speaking slowly. "I hoodwinked him, obviously. What are you doing here? It was a shock to see you."

"I couldn't help myself. The typhoon brought me, last night, after I ran away."

"A deserter?" Trenchard smiled faintly. Clare began to see that he was as damaged as Sleath had been, and had a look of deep exhaustion. But his smile was that of a man alert for any sort of lies and deception. That of a stranger. . . .

"Not exactly a runaway. There's a difference, Alan. I think there's a great lot for us both to explain, if you think it's worth while letting me stay here a little while. I set out to get to Batavia, if I could, but I got here instead. Have I said that before? Perhaps you mean me to stand here and—and say my piece before Senora del Agramonte, so that she can see that—that there's nothing left between——"

The strain was almost intolerable. A black band was pressing on her brow above her eyes. Clare lifted her hands to it and felt herself swaying in vain to keep her balance.

* * * * *

When she saw clearly again, she was seated on a couch in a cool room, with the harsh taste of spirits in her mouth.

"She's all right now," said Narcisa's voice. The girl's oval face was close to her and her eyes were green and intent, almost pleading. Clare saw her rise slowly and leave the room. She was alone with Alan.

"You fainted. I expect you've had a hard time of it." That was Alan's voice.

"Pretty hard," Clare answered. Alan sat in a chair across the room.

"I'm all right now," she said. "If you want to talk to me, I can listen and understand."

"I don't know that it's much use talking," Trenchard said. "Except that you and I were married once. It seems a long time ago, doesn't it? It's hard to begin. But to start with, I know you're not Marlowe's daughter. You're his secretary. I've seen the advertisement in the London paper you answered and know that he came to Kalu to deceive the old Rajah with you. It was a well-laid plan. It succeeded to some extent."

There was neither bitterness nor hatred in his manner, as he clasped his hands between his knees and leaned forward.

"Let me answer that." Clare felt, too, that her own manner was dead. "It chances that I'm Henry Marlowe's genuine daughter. It must sound quite incredible. But my mother, whom he thought

dead, made me answer that advertisement without telling me the truth. She wanted to give me back to my father, I suppose. . . . I've a wire from her, but I can't produce it here as proof because I left it at Kalu. It's rather like being virtuous by accident after the sin is found out. But I'm Henry Marlowe's daughter, just as the Rajah believed. I never told him. I'm not very proud of my father."

There was a pause. Trenchard made a polite gesture.

"It does sound incredible, as you remark," he said, "though in the Islands a lot of amazing things happen which wouldn't be believed in London, and *vice versa*."

Clare remained dumb. She watched a cluster of bright humming-birds dart in and out of some trumpet flowers at the window. In his eyes she was a ready but competent liar; the kind of woman who would lie to the last to get out of a corner. After a minute she said:

"Go on. It's your turn now."

"The next item on the agenda," said Trenchard harshly, "is the poisoning of Rajah David."

Clare's breath came sharply.

"That!"

"I was a damned fool that night. I'm speaking about the night before we were married, when I came into your room and found you and that Chinese woman with the Rajah's goblet. But how was I to know? How could I, Clare?" Her name came from him to indicate that she was anything more than a stranger and an enemy, for the first time. "I was blind and infatuated. I thought you were—everything good. You look it now, by heaven. That's one of the infernal advantages you have."

"Do you mean you think it was I who hired Lula Ling to do it?" She was on her feet, gazing down at him, with understanding coming only slowly.

"There was poison in that goblet that night, wasn't there?"

Clare nodded.

"Yes. I found her putting it in and she let it fall when I interrupted her. Alan, how could I? He'd been so kind and good to me. Infinitely kinder than Henry Marlowe. I couldn't! I didn't!"

Trenchard made a sharp movement. He, too, was on his feet, with a hope surging through him that died as it was born.

"You've broken with Marlowe, then? So you don't mind putting it on him. I understand. Don't worry. I'm ready to believe he's as guilty as you are."

Clare looked out of the window again. Once she had thought Ten Peacocks lovely. She knew now that it was like a brightly-coloured lizard, poisonous and cruel. The whole East was that, for her, and she wanted only to hide it from somewhere. . . .

"If you didn't, who did? Tell me that!" She found that he had caught her wrist.

"Does it matter? I might say it was my father. I might even say it was Gerald Sleath. But you wouldn't believe me. Are you going to take me back to Kalu and hang me, as soon as order is restored, Alan?"

She forced a smile and Trenchard turned away. He could not bear to look at the misty golden head against that sunlight. It looked

so terribly lonely. There had always been death in the Islands. But this was a little more than death. . . . On the verandah, Narcisa's shadow passed and Clare looked up.

"She's very beautiful. I said that in Manila, didn't I? I don't blame you, Alan."

"She's been very kind and a good pal. I shouldn't be alive now but for her. I owe her more than any other woman in the world—in gratitude."

"Are you going back to Manila or will you take her to Kalu?"

"I don't know. We haven't decided." Trenchard's smile was stony. "Don't you think it would be more fit to concern yourself about your personal fate? You're a prisoner of war. You've walked into the enemy camp and surrendered, Clare. You're going to be kept here out of further mischief, now you've come. You understand?"

* * * * *

Alan Trenchard walked thoughtfully along the tangled path which led to Suleiman's mosque when he left the house.

Clare! He wondered why she had come to Ten Peacocks. During the grim tension of the days when he had waited to decoy Gerald Sleath there, he thought he had succeeded in forgetting her. There had been Narcisa and the oath of retribution he had taken. There had been that bizarre joke with Sleath, an Eastern joke—the joke that some black Sultan of the Islands might have played in the days when Rajah David was young.

He limped yet and there were dark bruises at his throat. Trenchard had not been wholly unconscious when his opponent had flung him into Suleiman's coffin. Perhaps what still remained of Lula Ling's drug in his system had caused the strength to run out of him suddenly, while leaving him conscious. If Sleath had waited to squeeze a little harder there would have been another tale to tell. But when the lid crashed down his senses still remained with him.

It had been simple—simple as a conjuror's trick, once explained. The bronze chest had been an outer shell of the original casket which Suleiman had lain in. Suleiman the Bloody had been content that his earthly dust should be locked up after death but for his soul to sojourn in till the Prophet should call him there must be a more spacious chamber which could be unlocked from inside at the sound of the Prophet's voice. So it was that Suleiman's craftsmen had fashioned two interior spring locks for Suleiman's soul to open. . . .

Alan Trenchard did not care to remember the dark minutes that passed before his weak fingers groped to find the verdigris-covered discs which released him, knowing them to be there but unable to find them. He discovered them at length, and listened for some sign of Sleath. Then, with head hanging and limbs shaking he crawled out into the empty tomb, crept into a dark corner and waited an eternity, aware that neither he nor his enemy could continue the combat. But Sleath did not return. Instead, two Malay boys came and flopped on their frightened faces at the sight of him, recovered tremulously as he spoke their names and filled the bronze chest under his instructions. When they had gone with their burden, he had laughed in the dimness of Suleiman's tomb, laughed long and weakly. . . .

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

"AUT CAESAR AUT NULLUS"

JOE SANG'S automatic piano was playing a tinkling and melancholy tune, though there was nobody in the café save Joe Sang the Chinaman himself, and two men at the corner table at whom he glanced furtively between the task of polishing his tiny glasses and rice saucers. For a while Joe Sang watched them. Then he leaned across the counter.

"You better hop it, mister, I think. Joe Sang's no vellee good place for rough-house. You cause rough-house."

Gerald Sleath brought a cold eyeglass to bear on the nervously smiling yellow man. It was Caesar Lorenquo who replied.

"Soon, my jolly J. Chinaman. What's the hurry?"

"Young Rajah come home. See all the flowers and flags? But you no friends. He find you here. Gaw! Plenty enough typhoon last night!"

Sleath, smiling, took out a small washleather bag from his pocket. He poured its contents into his palm and laughed, the genial laugh which at other times had made his lieutenant glow with pleasure.

"There are twenty-three little black mascots here. Gifts from the young Rajah. I fear I can offer you no Grand Viziership now, Caesar, but these are some consolation. In Honolulu they might fetch as much as a hundred thousand dollars, for they're very fine black pearls. Enough to keep us in luxury for a brief while."

"Great Scotch! I'd clean forgotten those!"

"Count your blessings one by one. There are twenty-three of them here. Shall we move on? I do believe we're not welcome here."

Sleath, lazily replacing the washleather bag in his pocket, rose.

The two men went out of a rear door of Joe Sang's and made their way to a little rattan bungalow on the hillside. Only when they stepped across the threshold of the bungalow Sleath yawned and said:

"Pity the Rajah isn't bringing the Rance across with him. She's on Ten Peacocks, you know. So the men who came to announce the Rajah's coming, said. I'm afraid relations are strained and she's more or less a prisoner."

Sleath went into the inner room and Caesar Lorenquo sat on the verandah. It was hot there in the midday sun, but Caesar did not nod. On the contrary, he sat with his eyes as shining as the black pearls in Gerald Sleath's coat pocket. He was face to face with an incredible but shocking truth. Gerald Sleath was done. The demi-god was mortal. The idol had fallen.

Presently Caesar stirred. He allowed his shoes to creak as he strolled into the room where Sleath lay. But the white man remained fast asleep. After a minute or two, Caesar crept out again, found some brandy and tossed off a bumper. His very spine tickled with excitement and fear. He unlaced and took off his shoes with trembling hands. The brandy went like fire through him, inspiring his brain, steadying his nerves as he trod silently back into the bungalow again. . . . Without it he would never have dared to hold a knife above the sleeping Gerald Sleath, ready to strike if he should move,

while with the other hand he took the washleather bag from his late godhead's pocket. But Sleath did not move.

Drenched in sweat, Cæsar lowered his knife, took down a hanging oil-lamp and spilled the contents on the verandah. Even the little gurgling sound of the liquid in its reservoir, as he sprinkled it, stopped his heart. But Sleath, in the other room, only sighed and turned over on the couch. Cæsar struck a match noiselessly. He knew that it took about three minutes for a rattan bungalow to fire up, and only fire could keep Sleath from him. A beacon to welcome Rajah Alan—Sleath. . . .

Cæsar sprang aside out of the running trail of the flame as it rocketed along the verandah, and, making sure that the washleather bag was in his pocket, ran like the wind from the bungalow.

"Because I placed you upon a pedestal, Gerald, you know," murmured Cæsar, "I croaked that Scotch captain for you in Manila, and did bags of things to help you become a rajah. But I don't think you were ever seriously ambitious. It was just fun for you. And that wasn't fair to me, you know. What is fun for the boy is death for the frog. Not that I'm a frog."

"You see, dear old Sleath"—Cæsar began to address an imaginary companion again, then broke off with a murmured "Damn!" at himself. He had descended the bluff to the edge of the water where the *Joanna Blum*, the old motor-launch which Sleath and he owned, still lay hidden in the undergrowth. He stepped into her cagerly, with a last glance at the smudge of smoke that blackened the sky behind, and another reassuring squeeze of the bag in his pocket.

* * * * *

The vanillas about the bungalow on Ten Peacocks made a low rustling sound which caused Clare to feel almost drowsy as she sat in the shaded room. It was odd to be a prisoner again—her own husband's prisoner this time. Not that she wished to escape. Far from that. She had just said as much to Narcisa del Agramonte.

"If I had any sense of decency, I expect I should make the attempt," she said, "though I'm not sure where I should go."

Narcisa sent her a quick glance from between her black lashes. The Spanish girl was too Southern to understand Clare.

"You were trying to find your way to Batavia, weren't you?"

"Yes, but it was rather mad. I should never have reached it."

Clare paused. "I may be wrong, but somehow I don't think you would shoot me with the pistol I saw Alan give you if I ran for it."

A faint flush touched Narcisa's olive cheek.

"Perhaps I wouldn't. Perhaps it would be better if I did. But I've never used a pistol and I'm not—bad enough. I only love Alan, and he loves me."

"Does he?" murmured Clare.

Narcisa squeezed the cigarette she was smoking. Her eyes flamed a little sombrely.

"I thought women of your race were what are called 'sports,'" she said in a low voice. "I'm too Spanish to understand it. But I was always told it. Men are strange—men like Alan. They're tender-hearted. Why don't you go away? You'll never win him. You're a nobody. An impostor, a little everyday girl who got a chance of adventure out here and took it. I don't mean that to be

cheap and nasty. But I'm Narcisa del Agramonte. I'm as rich and powerful in Manila as Alan is in the Islands here. I'd help you to go, and give you the money. Perhaps you'll forgive the insult?" Narcisa ended, with rather spurious irony.

"Thanks." Clare spoke dryly, wondering at herself that she could be so calm. "But just think of all the money I could get from Alan. Alimony I think it is called. The only drawback to the scheme is that I'm not an impostor. I'm Alan's wife, and I didn't poison Rajah David, as he thinks . . . you don't seem very sure of your hold upon Alan, senora. Perhaps, after all, you have none."

She was unable to hate Narcisa. It was with a strange dismay that she became aware of it. Her gifts of hatred seemed to have dried up, and now she could only float on some vague sea of waiting, until Alan decided what to do with her. Clare pictured his arrival at Kalu that day with pomp and rejoicings. . . . The simple islanders would wonder why the Ranee, with whom he had gone away upon a honeymoon, was not with him, but they would not worry much.

A head and shoulders passed through the sunlight outside the window at this moment. It vanished as Clare looked up. The image of it remained on the retina of her eye, though her mind received it with simple unbelief. Only Cæsar Lorenquo, among the men she knew in the Islands, could make his hair look like black satin and wear a soft mauve collar and tie like that. But, of course, it could not be Cæsar. Clare did not move as a gentle and respectful knock sounded at the door of the room.

"Come in!" she said, and then, as the door opened: "Do you remember those five bullets I fired the last time you called to see me, Mr. Lorenquo? I've still got the pistol by me."

Clare lied quite coolly, though fear was the furthest emotion from her at that moment.

"I come under a flag of truce, Miss Clare——" he began.

"What, another? Please stand there, Mr. Lorenquo, say—ten feet away."

She saw that Cæsar struggled against fright, but he grinned, and wiped his forehead.

"Good lord, you're an Amazon, aren't you, Miss Clare?" he said. "Cigarette?"

"No, thanks. Has Gerald Sleath come with you?"

"Heaven forbid!" answered Lorenquo piously. "Sleath is a ruin. Rajah Alan has returned in triumph. The curtain has descended upon that dream. This is a friendly visit, Miss Clare, and by-gones are by-gones, I hope. I want to begin afresh. Don't think I'm going to try any he-man stuff. I'm not a he-man at all."

"Strange how one gets wrong impressions," returned Clare ironically.

She had almost forgotten the situation for a moment. Cæsar still thought she was ready for more fun and adventure. She could hardly blame him for that, considering the tragi-comedy she had played with him aboard the *Maraquita*. In the boat Sleath had sank under them in the lagoon, she had tried to disillusion him. But he was

like some whiter men. A duck's back was blotting-paper compared with Cæsar Lorenquo's, where insults from a woman were concerned.

"Is this a plant? I mean, did Señora del Agramonte arrange for you to come here?" she asked quickly. "And if so, why?"

"Oh, cut it out, Miss Clare!" Cæsar was limpidly beseeching.

"You're Cousin Alan's prisoner here, aren't you? He's put you in the care of his new lady-love—a caddish thing to do, I must say.

Well, then, I've come to take you away, if you'll agree. What is there to keep you in these confounded Islands now? Your co-conspirator, Mr. Marlowe?"

"What do you mean by that?" Clare felt some deep premonition.

"He ran into the jungle on the night of the typhoon—last night. If you're tender-hearted about Mr. Marlowe, Miss Clare, I'll whisper a secret. He wasn't tender-hearted about you."

"I'm afraid he wasn't"—she drew a bitter breath. "What happened to him in the jungle?"

"*Quién sabe?* I think the soldier ants could tell you. But he's gone. We're orphans of the storm, you and I."

Clare fought against a momentary darkness which came over her. The news fell like a glancing blow that only had a dull hurt. Soon she might sit down and think about it, but not just then. She hardly heard Lorenquo, but saw that he had drawn closer to her.

"The Islands are beastly cruel, Miss Clare. Won't you come to Honolulu with me? Oh, do! I'm rich"—Cæsar said it with humble pride and dropped upon one knee—"I love you. I've waited like one of King Arthur's knights—I think it was them—and now, at last, my chance comes. Won't you?"

He whipped round at a footstep, his bare forehead turning greenish yellow. But it was Narcisa del Agramonte who stopped on the threshold.

"I'm so sorry!"

"Please don't be, so far as I'm concerned," said Clare. "Mr. Lorenquo, of course, may feel more embarrassed."

"Not I," said Lorenquo stoutly, rising from his knightly knee with a bow to Narcisa. "Señora del Agramonte knows how much I worship you. I told her in Manila once. Didn't I, señora?"

"You said something about it, I recollect. He really is infatuated with you, Mrs. Trenchard. Why don't you go away with him? It's your chance. I saw the Dutch police-boat on its way to Kalu from an upper window, a few hours since, though I didn't tell you at the time. I presume Alan wirelessly for it. He's pretty bitter. There's no telling what he may do with you."

"Have you any other inducement, señora?" asked Clare.

Narcisa shrugged.

"I think you're being rather ridiculous to stand on your dignity with me. You must know you're beat to a frazzle. But I will suggest something else. My yacht's anchored off Little Sunda, about thirty miles from here. She's every bit as comfortable as the *Maraquita*, and she's at your disposal to take you to Honolulu or elsewhere."

"What a generous offer!" quivered Clare.

"It is!" said Lorenquo, his eyes shining like sloes.

"It's the Dutch police if you don't accept it," added Narcisa carelessly. "Unless Mr. Lorenquo cares to use force with a foolish young woman."

Her glance flicked over to Lorenquo who shook his head and looked at once foolish and determinedly chivalrous.

"Mr. Lorenquo wouldn't lay hands on me. And you don't do the exotic villainess well enough, señora," she said mercilessly. "It's a pity you spend such a large part of the year in America where people are more or less practical. Please don't be silly. Mr. Lorenquo's more than a bit sick of using force with me, I imagine. He seems to have done something to Mr. Gerald Sleath, who was his inspiration in that line. The way he changes colour when Mr. Sleath is mentioned beats a chameleon. You two idiots, won't you understand?"—Clare broke out in desperation which, deep within it, had some sort of laughter—"I'm Alan's wife. I was Henry Marlowe's daughter. And I didn't poison Rajah David."

"Splendid, Mrs. Trenchard!" a voice said.

Gerald Sleath stood in the doorway.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

POOR YORICK

"DON'T move, if you please," said Sleath with a smile. "Neither the ladies nor—er—gentleman. Rather a hackneyed situation, but life at the best repeats itself even in the Islands. Cæsar, my friend, turn out your pockets."

He lowered his weapon and walked into the room. Never had Gerald Sleath seemed so debonair, so like a cold Apollo, save for the bruise that showed faintly on his cheek, as he did at that moment. He stood by Cæsar who, mute as a stock-fish, dumb and condemned, a man hag-ridden, put his shaking hand into his pockets and drew forth a small Colt automatic and the washleather bag he had picked from the man who smiled at him.

"That's sufficient. Open the bag, Cæsar. Pour its contents into your hand, without fear or favour. Don't worry. I don't mean to lop your hand off yet."

Like one in a dream, Cæsar obeyed. A handful of small black pebbles from the beach of Kalu tumbled out of the bag and glinted dully in his palm.

"A trick your husband played upon me, Mrs. Trenchard, but mine is on an infinitely more modest scale, of course"—Sleath turned his eyeglass to Clare—"I was childish enough to take it out of Cæsar. In this world one passes everything on. I even plead guilty to showing him a bag of black pearls for that purpose, and then pretending to go to sleep in a little bungalow I own. A perverted sense of humour. Like Cæsar's own. He set the bungalow on fire while I slept the sleep of the 'possum. Do I bore you, Mrs. Trenchard?"

"No, you fascinate me," replied Clare slowly.

"Thanks, I don't misconstrue your words"—beneath his sardonic humour there was a flicker of the admiration which, once or twice, he had shown aboard the *Maraquta*. "Do you know your father is dead, Mrs. Trenchard? The jungle got him in the typhoon."

"You know that he was my father?"

"You left the wire from England behind in the house, and I

*Remember
the name*

CADBURY

*means
Quality*

found it. I had instincts, too. A domestic comedy. You're a brave little devil, as I said once before. I do believe you've won this game of chess, if there is any winner. The triumph of virtue and all that. Remarkable how life is as lowbrow as Hollywood itself at times. Will you excuse me if I take Cæsar away with me? And, Señora Narcisa, an apology for going back on my word in Manila. I hated doing it. But you got Cousin Alan after all—temporarily it may be, but love is fleeting at best."

"What do you mean to do, Gerald Sleath?" murmured Narcisa. She leaned back hard against the wall, motionless. Indeed, nobody in the room moved. Gerald Sleath had them meshed in a spell.

"Take away Cæsar to start with, lovely lady," he answered.

"Where to?" chattered Cæsar. "Where to, Sleath?"

An icy lift of the eyebrows was the only answer; the glacial look to a liberty-taking menial, which had always reduced Cæsar to confusion and silence. But Cæsar was there already now after his one mumbling question. He stood looking wretchedly at the man who had been his demi-god, his knees sagging a little like those of a man called to the scaffold, his face like tallow that melted under terror. Something of the bestial foolishness about him made Clare call out to Sleath:

"You're not going to kill him?"

"What a question!" answered Sleath lightly. "Have you ever noticed how white and well-kept my hands are, Mrs. Trenchard? By the way, I have the pearls in question with me here. I have quite a Cromwellian feeling of contempt for the little black baubles. Take them. They might help you to bargain for the virtuous Alan's forgiveness. Observe, Cæsar!"

Sleath smiled faintly at Cæsar as he handed the gems to Clare. Then he touched Lorenquo's wrist gently, and they went out together in the hot sunlight where the cicadas were singing shrilly in the undergrowth above the thunder of the beach. The two moved in silence from the green path to the dry sand, Sleath with a swinging stride, but Lorenquo with the movements of an automaton.

At last Lorenquo turned with a distorted grin, and said:

"D'you think I didn't know about those pebbles, Gerald? That's why I did it. Trumped your ace. I was a little offended at your continuous revelry in jokes at my expense. And then, you see, I wanted to buck you. You were in the doldrums——"

"This is another joke, Cæsar," said Sleath. "What on earth did you think it was?"

Cæsar stopped to rub his bloodshot eyes. He gulped and wiped his forehead with a coloured handkerchief. His laugh had a touch of hysteria.

"Golly! And I had the wind up. I had, really, for a moment. You're such a solemn nut when you're joking. You looked awful a moment ago. It was ghastly to think of our long friendship splitting on the rocks of misunderstanding, so to speak."

"You half-bred ape," said Gerald Sleath coolly. "Stop babbling like a drunken man. Look out to sea and tell me what you see there."

Lorenquo, shrivelled at one blow back to his previous state, sent a filming glance over the white breakers of the reef. Across the

aquamarine stretch of water beyond, some three miles out, a small steamer was ploughing swiftly towards Ten Peacocks, funnel streaming low smoke. Lorenquo saw the coloured splash of the Dutch flag at its stern.

"It's the village policeman," he said, with a dull glance at the other. "Is he after you—us?"

"Now regard the lagoon."

"Cousin Alan's launch. Of course! You're a super—super——"

"Superman, you want to say, you stammering hog. Step into the old *Joanna Blum*."

"But why? Cousin Alan's launch is faster——"

Sleath caught the half-breed by the slack of his well-creased trousers, flung him with a crash into the cockpit of the smaller motor-boat and wiped his hands. Following close, he paused a moment at the engine throttle to watch the distant steamer, which grew clearer moment by moment. It was yacht-built and slender and travelled swiftly. But with no haste, Gerald Sleath started the engine, and beneath the sluggish beat of the propellor the *Joanna Blum* drew heavily out of the lagoon. Once only Sleath bent his glance, inhuman and detached, to Lorenquo's quivering figure. The half-caste lifted clenched hands and sobbed.

"You're insane, Sleath. We can't get away in this!"

The other gave no reply.

At the bow of the steamer came a puff of white smoke. A sound like the smack of a mallet followed and something threw up a fountain behind the *Joanna Blum*. Sleath said, almost musingly:

"An old Krupp quick-firer. They'll stop that when they draw closer."

Lorenquo wet his cracked lips. His face was a grin of panic, permanently stamped, and his words were a wail.

"We could have got clear in Cousin Alan's launch, Sleath. My God, you must know it's twice as fast as this! Are you mad?"

Sleath tossed him a cheroot, but it bounced out of the nerveless fingers.

"You just said so. Steady your nerves, Cæsar. You're going to be a combined marksman and target soon. In Cousin Alan's launch they'd have shelled us out of the water with that big gun before we could get clear. That won't do. I want a little more sport. They'll be within revolver shot of us soon now. . . . Take my place in the sternsheets. Sit up, man! High!"

Some of Sleath's dead tranquillity was going. A scar of colour burned in his face. He leaned over to the jaundiced creature who looked back at him, and then he laughed, with the butt of his pistol hanging between his fingers. From the steamer, as she curved in, a crackle of shots from a heavy-calibre revolver came and tore slivers from the cabin roof.

"You white-livered blackamoor," Sleath said coolly. "Won't you do your buffoon's job and jingle your cap and bells for me for the last time then? I came all the way to Ten Peacocks to fetch you for it. Life's been far too serious. Get up!"

Kicking Lorenquo up from the floor of the cockpit, where he cowered, he forced a pistol into his hand. A hail floated over the water from the steamer.

"That's Trenchard. Fire at him. I'm covering you, Cæsar."

"And keeping shelter yourself," wailed Lorenquo. "Hiding there. Head down——"

"Exactly. For once. Fire, you Rajah's jester!"

Lorenquo's weapon went off wildly. He sat stiffened there under Sleath's pointing muzzle while a heavy bullet sent splinters from the coaming about him and one of them pierced his cheek. There followed a silence, save for the sound of the engine, a soft swish of sea and the throb of the steamer's screw. Then came a stentorian shout in the Dutch commissioner's voice:

"You two dere! Surrender in the name of the Queen!"

"Sounds Victorian. . . . Ah, the Dutch Queen, of course. Shoot him, Cæsar!"

Lorenquo sent a convulsive glance round and fired. From the starboard bow of the steamer there came a spurt of flame and a crisp crack and the half-caste pitched at Sleath's feet.

"Indifferent sport. . . . Alas, poor Yorick, I knew him well——"

Gerald Sleath stood upright, slim and graceful. At the rail of the steamer both Alan Trenchard and the bulky Dutch police commissioner were fully exposed as they reloaded. With a shrug, Sleath took aim at the Dutchman and Alan Trenchard's bullet shattered his shoulder as he did so.

"Damned ingratitude!" murmured Sleath through tight lips, his head hanging.

As he slipped down into the seat a dull explosion sounded under the counter where the *Joanna Blum's* petrol tank was. A surge of flame came shooting forth and the wind blew it from stern to stern like a fluttering banner, hiding the cockpit and the last moments of Gerald Sleath of the Islands.

* * * * *

"And dere," said Van Maas, the Dutch commissioner of police, "goes a very great villain. It was not a pleasant death. But someway I think he knew it would not be pleasant. A brave man he wass, though. He knew no fear and he loved wickedness as other men love good, and was faithful to it. That his epitaph shall be."

The burnt-out shell of the *Joanna Blum* rode, water-logged upon the blue water, near to the police-steamer. She was on the point of sinking and there was nothing visible in her but a charred tangle and a washleather glove of Cæsar Lorenquo's which had somehow escaped burning. As the two men gazed, she sank slowly, leaving only a blackened scum that thinned and went away.

"He might have got clear if he hadn't come to Ten Peacocks for Lorenquo," Alan Trenchard said. His face was set and stern.

"That was not devotion to a friend. It was the idea of a joke he had," answered the Dutchman stolidly. "Gerald Sleath a great joker was. And when the white men blay the great joke in der Islands, for power or money, I think dere is always blood in his mirth. Well, well! What now, Mr. Trenchard? Shall we go on Ten Peacocks and der pretty impostor put under arrest?"

Alan Trenchard winced under Van Maas's heavy chuckle.

"I want you to tell her what happened to me in Manila, if you will," he said in a low voice. "You'll understand that I can't."

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"Because you thought she der poisoning did? Ach, well, so did I for that matter. But it is der police privilege to think everybody did it till the guilty *schelm* is found. I shall think many innocents are guilty before I die, never fear. I will tell her of the confession of Lula Ling, with blesure. . . ."

Alan Trenchard was silent as the steamer loomed at cautious half-speed into the lagoon. He was shaken to alternate gusts of hope and despair by what had happened during the past few hours. He wanted now to forget his homecoming to Kalu, which had held only bitter unhappiness. Among all the flowers and singing which had greeted him, two shadows moved by his side, Rajah David, who slept his long sleep on the hill; and Clare, his wife—the wife he loved and always would. . . .

Then the police steamer came and he learned one great truth at least. Clare was innocent. . . . He heard the ghost of the Rajah's voice, deep and contemptuous, speak. "*You young fool!*" it said. It rang through him with despair, even when he had sprung aboard the police yacht as it started from Kalu in pusuit of Gerald Sleath. The Dutchman's men had almost got Sleath near his burning bungalow, but the man had slipped them and waved them on from the motor-launch in the very middle of the harbour. . . .

"Ach, there are two ladies, then, eh?" Van Maas cocked an eye at Trenchard and pointed to the verandah of the bungalow.

"One is Señora del Agramonte, of Manila," said Trenchard shortly. "I've told you what she did for me in Manila."

"So! And there is no ill-feeling between the gaoler and her prisoner? Well, well!"

"There's no cause," returned Alan almost sullenly. "Not regarding Narcisa. God knows there are other reasons."

He looked up and saw Clare standing there, with a great wrench at his heart, a sense that she was lost to him for ever. She was watching him from beneath level brows as he approached, with what, to him, seemed a cool contempt. The bravest, whitest woman in the world had come to the Islands and would go away again, leaving him there. . . . The Fool Rajah. . . .

"Clare."

She stepped forward. He did not meet her look.

"You know Van Maas? He came straight from Manila to Kalu. I think he has a story you're entitled to hear. Fire away, Van Mass, please."

The Dutchman sank heavily into a chair, with a paternal smile at Clare and a curious glance at Narcisa, who stood apart.

"This story is not long," he said. "It is short, but not so sweet. Dere was a house on the river-front in Manila which was known as the House of the Winking Blind. It was a nest of all sorts of wicked doings. Well, the police of Manila—very smart boys—raided it and filled two wagon loads of the dirtiest cargo this side of der Sandwich Islands. That was three days before I landed in Manila, understand?"

Van Maas nodded phlegmatically.

"In one of der rooms dere was a Chinawoman mit a high tempera-ture and apartments booked in de odder world. And, as her ravings was all of Kalu, der Inspector took me along. Ach, yes, it was Lula

Ling all right. It was of Gerald Sleath she raved for, years ago, Gerald Sleath had been her lover and she was his slave. And it was for Gerald Sleath she poisoned old David Trenchard."

"For Sleath!" Clare gave a low cry.

"Not for Henry Marlowe," Van Maas said gently. "She lied. Chinawomen are good liars. Long before you came to Kalu der poisoning it was begun by Lula Ling and her goblet. Slow, but sure. Had you never come, der Rajah would still have died."

"I thought it was my father," Clare said. "I'm glad."

They were her only words about that. She looked at Narcisa, who stood framed in the bright flowers of the verandah and then back at her husband.

"I'm tired of the East, Alan," she said. "I think it's beaten me. Am I free to go now?"

Trenchard nodded mechanically.

"You're free to go now," he said, "but before you do there's a letter for you here. It seems to have come by air-mail and steamer as far as Batavia. It reached Kalu yesterday."

Clare took the letter from him. She walked apart to the verandah rail to open it, because the handwriting was that of little mumsie in far England, and this beautiful, brutal world, of which Alan was a part, and which had caught her and hurt her so badly, was alien:

Clare, Dearest One,

You got my cable and know the truth now. Be good to him, Clare, for my sake, and don't harbour any ill-feelings on my behalf. When I read that, it looks ridiculous, because you admired him from the very first, didn't you? And now, I suppose, you will love him as much as you love me. Not more, I know, though if you did I shouldn't be jealous. . . . Let me know what he is like, just as though he was a stranger, dear. I expect you find each other splendid. . . .

It happened more than twenty years ago. You and I were in the wreck of the "Jan van Noord" and I managed to pretend that we were drowned. I thought then that he was wicked and unkind, but men change, thank God, and I think of the four of you, you and Alan, Henry Marlowe and David Trenchard, very happy together when I feel lonely. . . . No more of the past, Clare. . . .

Sometimes I ache to see you and Alan just once, to look upon the sort of happiness I never had. I should be content not to see your father, if that could happen. Indeed, I think that would be the best. You could tell me all about him, couldn't you? Listen to the manderings of an old woman! I'm keeping splendid—a little thinner, perhaps. . . .

It was a long letter. Clare did not read to the end then. Instead, she walked to the two silent men and handed the sheets to Alan.

"Will you read the first page?" she said.

Trenchard shook his head, with a drawn smile. He handed them back to her.

"No. Don't give me proof, Clare. It doesn't matter much, does it? When do you go?"

Van Maas, the police-commissioner, had left the verandah for the tiffin-room of the bungalow, moved equally by an unusual tact and

a chronic passion for gin julep. Ten Peacocks shimmered sleep in the heat. Behind Clare's misty golden head and slim, straight shoulders, as she stood against the tropical sunlight, Trenchard could see the peaks of Kalu.

"As soon as the next mailboat comes to Kalu, I must go," Alan said.

He nodded, almost impassively, and passed through the door after Van Maas. Clare looked out over the beach and the colour garden which was Ten Peacocks. It was all very peaceful now though some evil which had shadowed it for long had lifted for Clare had a fancy that Rajah David slept contentedly in the south Islands for the first time.

A little rustle sounded by her side. It was Narcisa, and she said

"So you're running away? You're pretty malignant, Clare. Unobservant, too. Don't you see how my stock has fallen like Wall Street on a crash day? It was never very high with Alan. I got I had the chance which a lot of maidens' prayers ask for—two on the island. It didn't come off. I might as well confess." Narcisa dropped the harshness from her voice all at once. "You say I wasn't exotic enough. Oh, it's true. But I can't take your place and put it in Alan's, can I? I've won his gratitude quite enough already. I should get tired of any more. He's a one-woman man, and you're the woman. Isn't that enough?"

She was gone before Clare could find any answer. The fringe of her coloured scarf showed on the beach below as Ramon Agramonte's widow who, in Manila, was the woman of snow, walked slowly towards the lagoon.

"Clare!"

It was Alan; against the sunlight of the window, his face haggard and fine-drawn.

"I'm back again, Clare—like a dog. If I go down into the lagoon, if I let you know that, though God knows I deserved it all, I suffer nearly as much as you must have done, would it make a difference to your judgment? We've both had a gruelling, Clare."

"A bad one," said Clare shakily. "Both of us. I never hurt you, Alan, never. I was too guilty myself."

She was sobbing a little in his arms, and, because she had known terror under the blue sky which smiled so reassuringly now and emerged from it unbroken till then, she was not ashamed.

"It's gone, dear heart," whispered Trenchard. "All the wickedness and all the wickedness. We're starting afresh, little Ranee."

THE END

